

## Breathing Water

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## Breathing Water

by [Thanatopsiturvy](#)

### Summary

Neloth is a scholar, first and foremost.

Upon hearing a great rumor, he embarks upon a journey to find The Arms of Chaos: two staves of legend capable of unspeakable power.

As a precautionary measure, he hires Teldryn Sero, the self-proclaimed "Best Swordsman in All of Morrowind." However, Neloth is one of the few people still alive who knows Teldryn's little secret.

With their fates intertwined, the two Dunmer head for Skyrim, unaware of the trials that lay before them, as well as the rewards their journey might reap.

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Honorary titles for this story:

"Neloth & Teldryn's Excellent Adventure" and "How to Win Friends and Achieve Your Goals by Almost Dying" (thanks [FourCatProductions](#))

### Notes

Hello my pretties!! Welcome to another adventure!

This story.... **This Story.**

Wowee, lemme tell you... it's been a time. I've run the full gambit of emotions writing a goddamn fic about *Neloth*, and I can't wait to drag all of you down into this rare pair hell with me.

This story is actually based on the Skyrim Creation Club quest: The Arms of Chaos. I don't have the ability to play *any* Creation Club quests, so anything and everything you're about to read is a combination of me just absolutely making things up, watching playthroughs, and honestly just going off the rails with my own plot. If you've played the quest, believe me, it doesn't end the way you think.

That being said, thanks so much to [Syllis](#) and Obsi for giving this first chapter a very thorough once(or twice)-over and really whipping it into shape.

Enjoy!

**Note:** The E rating is due to the final chapter!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

## Chapter 1





The cabin's oil lamp flickered as the boat rolled from a particularly aggressive wave, sending Neloth's inkwell sliding across the desk. He caught it before it tipped over the edge, cursing as the ink trickled over his fingers. Traveling by ship was both exceedingly tedious and remarkably dull. He never considered himself to have a weak stomach, but the perpetual tossing and turning had him feeling green around the gills. Neloth closed his eyes and took a deep, steadying breath through his nose, wiping his fingers on an old rag. The black stain of the ink remained.

Teldryn hadn't stirred since the sun had gone down. Chin tucked against his chest, he sat in a rickety chair against the far wall of the cramped cabin, feet propped up on some old crates, still in full armor. The bug-like goggles of his helmet stared vacantly at the cabin's door. Every now and then his head lolled with the rock of the waves. With Teldryn's face completely hidden, Neloth wasn't entirely convinced the mer was asleep.

The ship lurched and more ink splashed across the page of Neloth's journal. He sighed loudly, flipping the lid of the well over in agitation before trying to salvage his notes. It was a shame that the closest port to Skyrim was in the gods-forsaken city of Windhelm: miserable, cold, and overrun with ignorant, pathetic Dunmer. Teldryn had told him a bit about his own time there when Neloth had first approached him at the Retching Netch:

*"Five hundred gold." Neloth let the coins fall loudly onto the table. He tucked his hands tightly behind him, knuckles pressed into the small of his back. "You'd think someone of your notoriety would charge more."*

*Teldryn pulled the pouch towards him, loosening the ties and inspecting the contents. "You can always give me more if you think I'm under-charging."*

*Neloth let out a scoff, crossing his arms. "Is your insatiable wit included in the price?"*

*"No." He could hear the smile in Teldryn's voice, and it wriggled beneath Neloth's skin, itching like a papercut. "That comes free of charge."*

Neloth sniffed, dabbing at the ink-stained page. Hiring Teldryn had simply been a precaution. Neloth had no real weaknesses; it was true that he preferred the role of scholar, rather than to keep up the constant watchfulness of a combat mage. A mercenary was just insurance, really. An investment in his own safety. Neloth would have to be an idiot not to ensure his own wellbeing before embarking upon a dangerous journey.



And Neloth was hardly an idiot.

Teldryn grumbled something in his sleep as Neloth gave up on blotting at the journal. His notes were still legible, and that was what mattered. Their next stop after Windhelm would be the College of Winterhold. That is, if his sources were correct, and the rumors weren't simply the product of bored mages looking to stir up trouble. Even in his own House, any formal gathering of mages tended to make Neloth's skin crawl. It might be interesting, though, to see what had become of the famed College of Skyrim—no doubt it would give Neloth an opportunity to put that annoying Savos Aren in his place.

Something above them hit the floor with a loud thud and Teldryn sputtered awake with a start.

"So you *were* sleeping," Neloth mused, closing his journal. "Is that wise?"

"Is sleeping wise?" Teldryn repeated, his voice hoarse and dry. He pulled his feet from the crates, boots thumping loudly against the old planks of the ship. "You say that as if sleeping is a choice."

"With enough training, it can be."

"So you're telling me." Teldryn bent to retrieve his waterskin, pulling out the cork and tugging his scarf down. "That you *choose* not to sleep?" He laughed low and deep before tipping his head back and taking a long drink, finishing with a smack of his lips and a refreshed sigh. "That explains a lot."

"I have trained myself to only need a few hours of rest every two or three days," Neloth sniffed, crossing his arms. "For practicality, of course."

"Like I said." Teldryn grinned, his flash of teeth startlingly white before he re-covered his mouth with the worn red scarf. "Explains a lot." Neloth waved his comment away with a scowl as he pushed off the wobbly desk, striding over to look out the porthole. The sea was nothing more than an inky void, the foamy crests of the waves catching the faint moonlight before dissolving into blackness once again. There was no land in sight, at least not from what Neloth could see.

"How much longer are we going to be on this wretched dinghy?" He grumbled.

"How long was I asleep?"

"About two hours." Neloth straightened up. "I do hope you don't expect us to stop for sleep every single night."

"Make no mistake, Neloth. You may have paid me to come along on your little adventure, but I have absolutely no issue with returning your coin and leaving your impertinent arse stranded in the snow."

Neloth smiled thinly. "I'm so pleased to hear that you offer refunds." He was beginning to hate the bug-eyed stare of Teldryn's chitin goggles.

"We should reach Windhelm by sunrise." Teldryn resumed his previous position, kicking his feet up against the old crates and tipping his chair to lean back against the wall. "Try to get some rest."

Neloth huffed, looking out across the sea one last time before returning to the desk.

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The Windhelm port reeked of fish and algae. Early-morning dockworkers bustled about, yelling to one another in sharp, barking tones—hurling crates, rolling barrels, lifting pulleys of loaded cargo. A Nord was aggressively throwing the ship's ropes down to the dock, scowling at Neloath, forcing him to quickly sidestep to avoid being hit.

"Utterly charming," Neloath commented under his breath, dusting off his robes compulsively.

"Don't expect a warm welcome," Teldryn warned, stepping confidently down the ramp.

"I never expect *anything* warm from Skyrim."

"Naturally," Teldryn laughed, and Neloath wanted to tell him that it wasn't meant to be a cheeky joke. "What I mean is, I used to live here. Right after the Red Year."

"You mean you didn't got to Akavir?" Neloath sneered. "What a disappointment. That's what all the rumors said, after all." Teldryn continued to walk towards the city gates.

"The Gray Quarter," he said instead. "It's where they shoved all the Dunmer refugees. It was miserable then, and I doubt it's changed very much."

"Come now, Teldryn, are you not going to answer my question?"

"I'd answer it if you actually cared," Teldryn snapped. "But you don't. So drop it."

"My, my. Seems like a bit of a sore subject, hmm?" Neloath smiled wickedly to himself. Teldryn had no response.

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"You need to leave."

The weathered old Nord behind the counter looked like a shriveled piece of garlic, and Neloath was reminded of how poorly humans aged.

"And why, pray tell, would I do that?" Neloath pressed, looking her up and down pointedly.

"We don't serve gray-skins."

Neloath laughed, which only served to deepen the wrinkly Nord's scowl. "Of course, of course. How foolish of me. Not that I expected any of you to recognize the privilege it would be to serve a master wizard of the great House Telvanni."

"Listen, I don't care where your house is," the woman shot back. "But if you don't get out of my inn, I'll have you thrown out."

"Serjo." Teldryn was waiting by the door, arms crossed. "We should leave."

“I don’t respond to petty threats,” Neloth sniffed, lifting his chin. A particularly beefy Nord rose from his chair, puffing up his chest in an animalistic display of dominance.

Neloth laughed again. “Such a terrible hill to die on,” he tutted, already pulling magicka into his hands. “And I do mean *die* in the literal sense.” Before he could raise his hand to release the spell, he was pulled off balance by a firm tug on his arm, causing him to lose his concentration.

“You insolent little—!” But Teldryn was already dragging him towards the door with a surprising amount of strength. Neloth turned his attention back to the innkeeper. A small crowd had gathered, some standing on the steps that lead up to the second story. The music from upstairs had stopped. “You’ll rue the day!” Neloth managed to threaten before Teldryn pulled him out the front door.

“Do you have a death wish or are you simply mad? Because you *will* get us killed if you try to pull *shit* like that in this city again.” Teldryn’s fists were balled at his side as he walked.

“I would have liked to see them try to attack me.” Neloth dusted off his robes. “I could have transformed every last one of them into tottering teacups with the snap of my finger.”

“Oh yes, of course. Absolutely,” Teldryn drawled. “May I be the first to remind you, *serjo*, they don’t like Dunmer here. Unless you expect to find your little staff inside a Windhelm prison cell, you may want to reconsider the threats . ”

Neloth scoffed, crossing his arms in defiance. He pursed his lips. “So where are we going then?” All Neloth had told Teldryn concerning their journey is that they were retrieving a staff. This wasn’t untrue. It just wasn’t the whole truth.

“The Gray Quarter, like I suggested.”

Neloth pulled his cloak up tighter around his shoulders.

The New Gnisis Cornerclub. What a complete ash-heap of an establishment. And it wasn’t even on a corner. Nelth grimaced. It was sad to see his people living in squalor. Though, the sour looks on all of the patron’s faces at their arrival made the smallest bit of pity he felt evaporate faster than rain on the Red Mountain.

“Evenin’.” The mer behind the counter had a thick Velothis accent that slurred his consonants and vowels together. The entire place stunk of uncouth Redoran. Hadn’t Neloth suffered enough on Solstheim? “Have a seat. There’s plenty of space.” Neloth looked down the empty bar and raised a brow.

“Thank you, ser,” Teldryn offered a bit too politely, sliding onto one of the bar stools. Jerking his head aggressively, he motioned for Neloth to do the same. Neloth complied with a sigh.

“What can I get you, gents?”

“Well, seeing as we were kicked out of the local inn simply for *existing* ,” Neloth sneered, “I wouldn’t actually mind something on the stiff side. Even if it is a bit early.”

“You must be new here,” the bartender scoffed, shuffling beneath the counter and procuring a large bottle of sujamma. “Morrowind?”

“Solstheim,” Teldryn corrected, tugging at his scarf and removing his helmet.

Neloth studied him curiously as the bartender poured their drinks. He hadn't really gotten to see much of the mer's face since hiring him, what with the stubborn bastard constantly wearing the damn chitin helmet. He must stink to high heavens beneath all that thick, plated armor.

Teldryn continued, oblivious to Neloth's scrutiny. "I used to live here for a bit. Right after the Red Year. My *patron* here didn't quite believe me when I told him the city was still quite unfriendly to Dunmer." He smirked.

"I think I prefer you with your helmet on," Neloth quipped.

Teldryn smiled mirthlessly and raised his small cup in silent cheers before knocking it back.

The bartender shrugged, beginning to wipe down the counter. "Yeah, things have gotten worse with Ulfric in charge, but you're safe in here at least. For now."

"You don't know when the next carriage might be coming around, do you?" Neloth asked. "We have business in Winterhold and I'd prefer to leave this city sooner rather than later."

"Next carriage should be coming around noon. It's about a day's journey in the back of a wagon to get up to Winterhold. You might want to purchase some warmer clothes."

Neloth's lip pulled into a sneer. "Thank you for the suggestion."

"Where might we find a seller?" Teldryn asked, giving Neloth a cold stare.

"Revyn Sadri over at Sadri's Used Wares should have something worthwhile."

"Used...?" Neloth sputtered.

"Thank you, ser," Teldryn replied quickly. "We appreciate the advice."

"The name's Ambarys. Give a shout if you need anything else." And with that, the bartender left them alone.

"Charming little establishment." Neloth absently swirled his cup of sujamma.

"They're doing their best," Teldryn grumbled as he reached for the bottle and poured himself another shot.

"Try not to get completely wasted before noon."

"Unlike the waifs of House Telvanni, I can actually hold my liquor."

"Forgive me, I didn't realize House Indoril was known for its stamina."

"Could you not bring that up?" Teldryn's expression was pinched. He glanced over his shoulder and lowered his voice. "I'm House Redoran, as far as anyone is concerned."

"I don't understand why you're hiding." Neloth took a prim sip of his sujamma and grimaced. "Putrid."

"I'm not hiding."

"Please," he set his cup down. "Enlighten me, then. Why is the legendary Nerevarine whoring himself out as a lowly spellsworn in the run-down tavern of a failed mining town? Hmm?"

"What would you expect me to do?" Teldryn spat in a low whisper. "Throw a parade in my own honor? Name a city after myself? May I remind you that there are still a great many people out there who would love nothing more than to see me dead." He knocked back another shot of



sujamma, and immediately poured a third. “I’m simply trying to live my life. I’m no great hero. Never was.” That last bit was murmured into his cup, almost too quietly for Neloth to catch. Almost.

“Humility is it? Self-loathing? Neither is becoming of you.” Neloth took another reluctant sip of the terrible sujamma. Teldryn still wasn’t being forthcoming. Eventually, though, Neloth would whittle down the other mer’s defenses. He never gave up on anything without finding the answers he sought.

“So, tell me more about this artifact I’m supposed to be helping you retrieve.”

“Hmm?” Neloth looked up, caught off-guard by Teldryn’s graceless attempt to change the topic.

“This... *staff*. What’s the story?”

Neloth schooled his expression and shrugged. “It’s a staff of great power. It supposedly disappeared decades ago. Many scholars have postulated that the staff was destroyed for good, but I have reason to believe it cannot be destroyed. Or, possibly, there have been others created in its image.”

“The staff is indestructible?” Teldryn asked with an arch of his brow.

Neloth drew his lips tightly together. He’d said too much. “What I mean is that I could find no evidence that this staff was actually destroyed. My most recent... *research* has led me to Winterhold—specifically the Mages College. I believe there may be evidence of where the staff or its re-creations might be.”

“So, you hired me to go on some sort of scavenger hunt? Needles in a haystack?” Teldryn knocked back yet another cup of sujamma and wiped his mouth on the back of his bracer with a grunt.

“Oh, have a bit more faith in me in that, my dear Teldryn. You *are* in the company of a master wizard—”

“—of House Telvanni, believe me.” Teldryn pushed to his feet. “*I know.*”

“Where are you going?” Neloth demanded.

“To take a piss.”

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The carriage didn’t arrive until an hour past high noon. They’d bought some extra furs and scarves from Sadri’s sad hole-in-the-wall. Neloth was happy to have the extra warmth on the journey. Though he’d never admit it.

“What are we going to do once we’re in Winterhold?” Teldryn asked, raising his voice over the clapping of the horse’s hooves and the clatter of the carriages wheels.

“I need to double check my research. Also, the Arch-Mage is an acquaintance of mine. I’d love to

see if Savos Aren has actually made something of himself.”

“Of course,” Teldryn grumbled. “Can’t miss the opportunity to belittle someone, now, can you?”

It was going to be a long carriage ride.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

Welcome back!

This story is going to shift POVs every other chapter - It worked out so that Neloth and Teldryn get five chapters each. (Writing an entire story from Neloth's perspective was not only daunting, but also exhausting.)

So enjoy a Teldryn POV chapter! I find his are longer, most likely because I've already written *so much* from the inside of his head - but this Teldryn is quite different from my other series.

Thanks again to [Syllis](#) and [KestralShade](#) for the lovely beta work - making sure this story is *crisp*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Teldryn was tired.

The past forty-eight hours yielded very little sleep. His water skin was empty, he had a pounding headache, and Neloth wouldn't shut up for more than five minutes. Not to mention the cold. The blasted cold of Skyrim was something he hadn't missed. Northern Solstheim got nippy, especially near the Skaal settlements. However, there was something about Skyrim's wind – the way it stung the tips of Teldryn's ears, cut through the layers of his armor – left him feeling raw and worn-down. He could never live here again.

"Incredible," Neloth chuckled. "I haven't been here in over a hundred years. The collapse really destroyed almost the entire city. How unfortunate."

"You don't sound that sorry for them," Teldryn grumbled, rubbing his hands together for warmth, small sparks forming between his palms.

"Oh, it's because I'm not. I mean, yes it's very sad," Neloth dusted some snow off his shoulder, "but there's no use lamenting the past. At least the College held up. Not that it was much to begin with."

"If you're just going to insult it the entire time, then why are we even here?" Teldryn's headache was worsening. He cast a simple healing spell on himself that took the edge off, but the pressure behind his eyes still lingered.

Neloth clicked his tongue. "Am I not allowed to be critical of an establishment that offers magical education? I was Master of Sadrith Mora, after all. Besides, the College is at least unaffiliated with the blasted Mages Guild, so I have no specific qualms with them... other than incompetence." They trudged through the ragged little town, snow crunching beneath their feet.

"But no," Neloth continued. "My business with the College of Winterhold extends beyond simple

boastings of superiority. They have several resources that I would like to consult regarding the... artifact of interest. I'm at a bit of a dead-end in my research and need access to a particular collection the College inherited. That's assuming the College is in a better state than what's left of Winterhold."

Teldryn took a moment to look around. Gaunt faces peered out at them from frosted windows. Doors snapped shut as they passed. A lone guard passed them with a nod; otherwise the place felt like a ghost town.

"It's eerie," he murmured. Neloth merely hummed in response.

The hike across the crumbling bridge was nerve-racking. Teldryn kept his gaze forward, planting one foot solidly in front of the other. Neloth seemed undaunted by the treacherous passage, head held high, shoulders squared. Teldryn hazarded a single glance over the side of the bridge, only to immediately regret it, his head spinning wildly, pulse throbbing in time to the crashing waves far below them. The Sea of Ghosts, they called it. He could understand why. How many lives were lost beneath its icy black waters?

"Ah, how quaint." Neloth paused for a moment as they passed through the main gates, grinning up at the massive statue of an unnamed mage. "I'd say it's a bit on-the-nose."

"Can we get out of the cold, please?" Teldryn yelled over the howling wind.

"Yes, yes. So delicate."

The main hall was chilly, but at least there was no wind. Teldryn shuddered, pulling a small flame into his hand to warm up.

"May I help the two of you?" A weathered human approached them from the innermost room, a gaggle of fresh-faced students peering curiously after him.

"Quite possibly," Neloth began, straightening up. "My name is Neloth, master wizard of the great House Telvanni of Morrowind. I'm here to see Savos Aren."

"Oh! How fascinating." The old man smiled, though his eyebrows remained drawn together. "The Arch-Mage should be in his quarters. I'll have Ancano here show you the way."

A severe-looking Altmer seemed to materialize from the shadows of the hall, his expression one of pinched appraisal, like a livestock breeder preparing to cull a sickly herd.

"And what business might you have with the Arch-Mage?" His voice was nasally, his accent clipped and prim. "I am his current advisor. Whatever issue you might have, I assure you I'm perfectly capable—"

"My business is my own." Neloth crossed his arms. "And I'm quite certain you will be no use to me."

Ancano visibly bristled, straightening up even more. He towered over the pair, his mouth curling into a sneer. "As you say. Follow me." He spun on his heel and strode out of the room in several

long strides. Teldryn laughed quietly to himself, always amazed at the Altmeri ability to turn any phrases into a venomous curses.

They followed Ancano down a long, cold hall, turning sharply to stand in front of a set of massive, enchantment-laced wooden doors. With a quick flourish of his hand, the wards parted like a curtain, and Ancano procured a fairly normal-looking key to finish unlocking it.

“Quite the security precautions,” Neloth commented. “Savos has grown paranoid, it seems.”

“So you’re acquainted with Savos Aren then?” Ancano’s tone was still waspish, but the question, at least, seemed to be born out of actual curiosity. He opened the doors and began to lead them up a set of narrow stone steps.

“Oh yes, we knew each other back when Morrowind wasn’t yet a smoldering ash-heap. I never dreamed anyone would let him run a college.”

“You believe the Arch-Mage to be incompetent?” Ancano’s questioned seemed to be laced with ill-concealed glee.

“My dear boy,” Neloth chuckled. “Compared to myself, *everyone* is incompetent.” Teldryn bit the inside of his cheeks, stifling his amusement.

“Well,” Ancano sniffed, “regardless, I’ll make sure to add your opinions to my report. The Thalmor take magical training very seriously.” *Thalmor*. Teldryn’s stomach dropped.

“Oh, right. I keep forgetting Skyrim is in the midst of a pesky little war.” Neloth sighed dramatically as they reached the top of the stairs. “So inconvenient.”

“Incredibly,” Ancano bit out through clenched teeth, leading them deeper into the building. Shelves of books lined the walls, as well as tall cabinets and dressers, filled with knick-knacks and curiosities. The room seemed to be the warmest they’d encountered thus far, and Teldryn silently thanked Azura that the Arch-Mage was a Dunmer.

The hall opened into a domed chamber with a rather impressive apothecary garden at its center, mage lights twinkling between the branches of a living tree. The flowers and herbs formed a tangle of color and pattern that spilled out across the stone floor with a poetic kind of chaos. Ancano turned to the right abruptly, clicking his heels together in a soldierly fashion and giving a quick bow.

“Arch-Mage,” he began, “you have guests.”

“Do I?” Savos was reclined in a round-backed chair at a small table, a book perched atop his crossed knee and a red apple half eaten in his other hand. He looked up from his reading and paused mid-chew as his eyes landed on Neloth. His face paled.

“Savos Aren,” Neloth drawled with a quirk of his lips. “It has been too long.”

“Master Neloth,” he sputtered, scrambling to his feet, the book sliding from his lap and hitting the floor loudly. Ancano suddenly looked interested. “To what do I owe the honor of this visit?”

Neloth’s smile almost looked kind, if Teldryn didn’t know better. “Glad to see you’re still

respectful of your superiors.” Yes, Ancano was looking *very* interested. “I’m traveling with my...,” Neloth gestured vaguely at Teldryn, “companion here in search of an artifact. I...” He paused, turning to look Ancano up and down. “You may leave now.”

Ancano’s expression twisted with indignation. “Whatever you have to say to the Arch-Mage I should also be privy to, being his advisor as well as an ambassador of the Thal—”

“I think not,” Neloth cut him off. “This is a private matter.” He paused, forcing a smile. “Between old friends.” The addition made Savos’s eyebrows shoot upwards and even Teldryn could smell the bullshit of the bluff. Ancano opened his mouth, most likely to continue to protest, but Savos held up a hand.

“Please, give us some privacy. I shall brief you on the nature of our conversation at our nightly meeting.”

Ancano’s eyes narrowed, but he bowed rigidly, lips pressed thin as he smiled. “As you say, Arch-Mage.” Neloth watched him go with an air of disinterest. He waited until he heard the distant echo of closing doors before hastily casting a spell with a flick of his wrist. The red energy of his magicka rolled through the room, seeping through the floors, and Neloth’s eyes tracked something that Teldryn couldn’t see.

“Good, he actually left. Now,” Neloth turned back to Savos. “I need access to your library.”

“Master Neloth,” Savos began, bending to pick up his fallen book. “I... I’m sure you’re on a tight schedule, but please. Have a seat. You and your companion must be weary from your journey. May I offer you something to eat? To drink?” Teldryn’s stomach growled loudly, and Savos gave him a knowing, but sympathetic smile.

“Very well,” Neloth agreed in exasperation, as if the Arch-Mage’s hospitality were an inconvenience. He sat down heavily into one of the chairs. “We can discuss over a meal. Do you possibly have any canis-root tea?”

Savos was kind, accommodating, if not a little absent-minded. Teldryn liked him. He wasn’t sure what history Savos and Neloth shared; the two of them spoke only in vague references to their old life in Morrowind. Teldryn removed his helmet, somewhat reluctantly, feeling a prickle of nervousness as Savos studied him out of the corner of his eye.

“You were part of the Morag Tong?” he asked, and it took Teldryn a moment to realize that Savos was addressing him.

“Beg pardon?”

“Your facial tattoos.” Savos gestured to his own face. “You were part of the Tong?”

“Ah, yes. Briefly,” Teldryn replied hastily.

Neloth sighed loudly. “No, he wasn’t part of the damn Tong.” A tense silence followed.

“Neloth,” Teldryn growled in warning, eyes focused somewhere on the opposite wall.

“What? It’s a terrible cover story. Besides, I don’t want people thinking I hired an ex-Tong member. Not that I care about my reputation necessarily, but it’s in bad taste.”

“I’m sorry,” Savos set his tea bowl down. “What is your relation exactly?”



“Very old acquaintances,” Teldryn replied with a forced smile.

“He was the Nerevarine.” Neloth took a small sip of his tea, intentionally ignoring the tension he’d just created. “Emphasis on *was* .”

Teldryn wanted to murder him.

He wanted to wrap his hands around Neloth’s neck and squeeze until the pale grey of his skin blackened, until his eyes dulled – blood congealing as his veins bulged beneath the pads of his fingers.

Savos laughed, and Teldryn was ready to laugh with him, play it off as a joke, but then Savos looked back to Neloth, then back to Teldryn, and the smile abruptly slid from his face.

“By Azura, you’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Say hello to the Hortator – hero of House Indoril.” Neloth’s tone was dry, sarcastic, and he held Teldryn’s gaze over the rim of his cup challengingly. *What are you going to do about it?* This was some kind of test. A supremely fucked-up test. Or perhaps Neloth simply enjoyed seeing Teldryn miserable. He should have never agreed to this damn quest.

“I...” Teldryn wasn’t quite sure what to say. “I... um...”

“It’s an unbelievable honor,” Savos said softly. “A true honor to meet you, Nerevarine.”

Teldryn blinked, stunned, only just noticing that Savos had extended his hand. He took it tentatively and shook. “Call me Teldryn, please.”

“I was just a young lad when you...” Savos opened and closed his mouth several times. “I’ve just... I never thought I’d actually meet you.”

“Ah, well,” Teldryn laughed nervously. “I never thought I’d find myself at the College of Winterhold.”

“It was rumored that you fled to Akavir,” Savos continued. “That after you murdered Vivec and Baar Dau fell to Nirn...”

“I didn’t murder Vivec,” Teldryn snapped. Savos sat back suddenly in his seat and even Neloth quirked an eyebrow at the outburst. Teldryn coughed into his fist, composing himself. “He simply vanished.”

“Forgive me,” Savos said after a moment, a purple flush creeping across his cheeks. “I didn’t mean to fall victim to gossip. It’s just... nobody knew.”

Teldryn cleared his throat once again. “Yes, well, enough about me.”

“Ever humble,” Neloth muttered, setting his tea bowl down a little harder than necessary. “But I suppose we should get back to the topic at hand.” He crossed his legs, leaning back in his chair and clasping his hands in his lap. “Does the college still house the Ysmir Collective?”

Savos looked momentarily taken aback by the question, checking over his shoulder once. “Yes, we do. Is that what you’re here for?”

“Indeed.”

“You’ll have to speak with Urag. He runs the Arcanaeum. May I ask what you’re researching?”

“Of course,” Neloth smiled, baring his teeth. “I need information regarding the Staff of Chaos.”

Teldryn felt the muscles beneath his left eye spasm. He slowly turned to look at Neloth, hot, boiling anger threatening his recently regained composure.

“I’m sorry. *What?* ” Teldryn leaned forward in his seat. “You dragged me all the way from Solstheim to look for the bloody *Staff of Chaos* ?” A raw, hysterical laugh clawed its way up and out of his throat. “You’re an absolute madman and I never should have trusted you.”

“Master Neloth,” Savos began, rolling his tea bowl nervously between his palms. “The staff was destroyed hundreds of years ago. It’s nothing more than a legend, now.”

“I didn’t say I was looking for *the* Staff of Chaos, simply that I need information surrounding it. Try to refrain from jumping to unfounded conclusions going forward.” He picked his own tea bowl back up, inspecting its contents. “No, if my sources are correct, there isn’t simply another staff like the Staff of Chaos, but *two* staves,” Neloth continued, leaning forward onto his elbows, steeping his fingers together. There was a spark behind his eyes—hunger, curiosity, the thrill of a mystery to be solved—a look that Teldryn had yet to see. “The legend states that a descendant of the original creator of the staff attempted to recreate the Staff themselves. In order to harness the same amount of magicka, however, they were forced to split the power into two separate staves. They were known, respectively, as the Arm of the Sun and the Arm of the Moon. Together, they form the Arms of Chaos. There have been whispers of a mage that has been trying to restore them, or recreate them. I plan to intervene. Such power should not go unchecked, especially not in the hands of... *lesser mages*. ”

“And what would you do once you got these staves?” Teldryn pressed, his temper flaring. “What, exactly, is your goal with this? Rule all of Nirn? Destroy Mundus and rebuild it in your image?”

“Come now, Teldryn. Do you really think so lowly of me?” Neloth sucked at his teeth. “I’d use them in the pursuit of knowledge, of course. To walk between realms and learn all there is to know.”

Teldryn scowled at him. “All knowledge comes at a price.”

“Oh please, spare me your cryptic warnings, *Nerevarine* . I’m well aware of the price of knowledge.” Neloth held Teldryn’s unblinking gaze for a long, tense moment until Savos nervously cleared his throat. He poured more tea into Neloth and Teldryn’s cups, in an obvious attempt to soothe the tension between them.

“Well, you are welcome to use whatever resources we have available. I’ll let Urag know of your presence. How long will you need?”

Neloth looked down into his tea bowl and the tension broke. He lifted it to his lips for a quiet sip. “Only a day or so, most likely. Depending on what I find.”

Savos offered a smile. “We’re honored to have you. Both of you. I’ll send for two rooms to be prepared. You can stay in the Hall of Countenance with the professors and older students.”

“Thank you for your hospitality.” Teldryn smiled in return. “A warm welcome has been difficult to

find in Skyrim.”

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Teldryn gasped awake, violent shivers racking his body and sweat gathering in the dip of his breastbone. He sat up, pushing backwards to lean against the headboard, disoriented. The cool light of the Hall of Countenance cast long shadows across the floor like creeping fingers. Silence greeted him apart from the distant howling of the wind, whistling through the cracks of the long, glass windows that overlooked the courtyard. He took a steadying breath, wiping his forehead on the back of his hand and closing his eyes. A face materialized – a golden, sightless mask. Teldryn’s eyes snapped open again, curling his fists into his bedsheets.

“Azura. Mother of Roses. Goddess of Dusk and Dawn. You see into the Twilight of the future. You guide your child from darkness to light, and from light to darkness. Your foresight protects me. Your insight sustains me. I shall fear no harm. For I live under your wisdom. Twilight guides my path. All has been foreseen. All will be revealed in time.”

Teldryn repeated the prayer several more times until his heart rate began to slow, sweat drying on his brow and leaving him chilled. He threw the covers back and swung his legs over the side of the bed, rocking forward to stand. The cold stone floor sent a spike of pain up the backs of his legs and caused the foot he’d broken many years ago to throb angrily. He cursed under his breath, hobbling over to his pack and pulling out a potion – a simple sleeping draught – one of the less powerful ones he’d brewed up before leaving Solstheim. Pulling the cork out with his teeth he knocked it back with a grimace, wiping his mouth and setting the empty vial down next to his bed. The effect was nearly instant. Teldryn felt his eyes droop, his arms and legs doubling in weight as he stumbled back over to the bed, falling heavily onto the mattress. He’d barely pulled the covers back up around him when sleep pulled him under. The rest of the night was dreamless.

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“Disrespect my books and I’ll have you torn apart by angry atronachs.”

Teldryn liked Urag already.

Neloth blinked. “Well that seems a bit excessive. But you can rest assured knowing I respect books more than I respect most people.”

Urag smirked, lowering himself back down into his chair with a grunt. “Then we’ll probably get along fine. Now, what is it you’re looking for?”

“I need access to the Ysmir Collective.”

“Shh!” Urag waved a hand. “Not so loud.” He looked about nervously. “Maybe you’ve forgotten,

but there's a Thalmor ambassador at the College right now."

"So?" Neloth crossed his arms. "I don't understand what that-"

"Ysmir? Also known as Tiber Septim. Also known as *Talos*."

"It's just a title. What's your point?"

Urag looked to Teldryn in disbelief. "He's not serious, is he?"

"I'm afraid so."

Neloth gave him a peevish look. "What?"

"The Civil War, you s'wit!" Teldryn shot back. "The Thalmor have banned Talos worship."

"Ah. Well I don't see what that has to do..."

"We burned the Ysmir Collective," Urag said, a bit louder, enunciating clearly. "To comply with the Aldmeri Dominion's terms."

"You..." Neloth sputtered, clutching at his chest. "You mean to tell me that you, a mage who just threatened to sic atronachs upon me if I so much as *looked* at a book the wrong way, allowed a gaggle of high elves to *burn an entire ancient collection of texts*?"

"Sorry, I can't help you," Urag said, getting to his feet and pointedly jerking a chin over his shoulder as he walked back towards a door behind the desk.

"What are you doing?" Neloth demanded.

Teldryn reached over, grabbing onto Neloth's scarf and pulled him close enough to whisper into his ear. "Will you shut up, you oblivious old coot, and follow the mer?" Neloth shoved Teldryn away, visibly appalled. He straightened his robes and lifted his chin defiantly, striding behind the librarian's desk to follow Urag into a small passage that quickly turned into a cramped, spiral staircase sloping steeply downwards.

"One moment," Urag grumbled, quickly warding the door with a complex series of runes. "Alright, follow me."

The stairwell was tight, and while Teldryn was not a tall mer, he still felt the claustrophobia creeping in. The stairs ended in a narrow hallway that opened up into a bedchamber: walls lined with bookshelves, scrolls scattered across a long table. A small bed in the corner sat unmade, a few rumpled robes strewn across the end.

"Forgive the mess," Urag offered half-heartedly. "I don't usually have guests."

"Can you please explain to me why you just led me down to your bedroom?" Neloth crossed his arms, cocking his head to the side.

"We didn't burn the damn Ysmir Collective," Urag growled, pinching the bridge of his nose. "We simply need the Thalmor to believe that we did."

"The entire situation is preposterous." Neloth crossed his arms with a scoff. "The name has nothing to do with the contents. For the love of Azura, the Collective *came* from Morrowind."

"But not originally," Urag argued. "The texts were *gathered* in Morrowind."

“Well, obviously.” Neloth rolled his eyes. “What I *meant* is that, overall, the majority of the texts have nothing to do with Ysmir.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Urag motioned them across the room with a wave of his meaty hand. “We’re talking about Thalmor here. Religious zealots, the lot of them. They care more about censorship than accuracy.” He tugged on a copy of *The Firmament* and a mechanism within the bookcase clicked, the entire shelf swinging outwards to reveal a secret passage.

“Follow me. And if either of you tell anyone about this, I’ll tear your throat out myself.” He jutted his lower jaw forward, his tusks catching the flickering torchlight. “The only reason you’re down here at all is because the Arch-Mage seems to trust you. Why, I couldn’t say.”

“Good to know you hold Savos in such high opinion,” Neloth scoffed. Urag ignored him.

They followed the mer down another tight corridor that ended in a dank cellar-type room; a lone shaft of light streamed down from the center of the low ceiling where a perfect square had been hewn into the stone. There were shelves upon shelves of books, all in varying conditions. Urag cast candle-light, Neloth almost immediately doing the same. Teldryn simply peered curiously up into the hole in the ceiling – a diagonal shaft that seemed to breach the outer wall of the building, letting in just enough light and air to keep the room ventilated. And *cold*. Teldryn’s goggles were beginning to fog from the heat of his breath. He pushed them to rest against the ridge of his helmet, pulling his scarf up further, winding it around his nose and ears.

“Over here.” Urag had moved a ways down through the room. His candle-light spell cast long shadows against the narrow bookcases. They framed the walkway like ancient tombstones - just as silent.

“So, is this the educational contraband storage room?” Neloth joked, and Teldryn chuckled almost out of habit.

“You could say that,” Urag replied, a hint of amusement to his voice. “Some of these books are illegal right now, while others are simply deemed too dangerous to allow the students to openly access. Nothing is technically off-limits at the College; you simply have to know what you’re asking for.”

“How very noble,” Neloth murmured flatly. “I assume that I won’t be able to take any of the Collective up with me?”

“No. Not with that damn Thalmor agent roaming the halls, breathing down my neck.” Urag brushed his fingertips along the spines of the books reverently. “But, there are some tables down here. I can try to make it comfortable for you.”

“Ah, well,” Neloth straightened up a bit. “That would be appreciated.”

“By the gods, you almost said ‘thank you’.” Teldryn covered his mouth dramatically. “What a privilege to witness.”

Neloth ignored him, eyes following Urag’s fingers. “Is this it?”

“Part of it. What exactly are you looking for?”

“Anything regarding the Staff of Chaos.”

Urag hummed thoughtfully, striding confidently around the shelf. “This one probably has what you need.”

“What about this one here?”

“Oh, that? Well...”

Teldryn wandered off, having nothing particularly useful to add to their interactions. He perused the long shelves, reading the different spines. Many of the books had no markings on their covers – simply plain, leatherbound volumes, sometimes hand-written. Had Teldryn been more bookish, the experience would have been absolutely thrilling. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy reading, but it just never held his interest. He'd once read a fiction book about a thief that he'd rather enjoyed, but history and religious practices bored him to tears. He also had the unfortunate experience of reading about himself once. It put him in a sour mood for weeks.

Curiously, he plucked one of the plain-covered books from the shelf, flipping it open. It was written in a language he had seen before, the author's handwriting scrawling and erratic. He wrinkled his nose and closed the book, returning it to the shelf. What he wouldn't give for a hot bath and a bottle of sujamma right about now... He wandered back towards the sounds of Neloth and Urag's voices, finding them at a weathered table, both leaning over several opened books. Neloth's eyes snapped up.

“Try not to go wandering off too far,” he tutted. “I'll have to put a bell on you.”

Teldryn made a rude gesture before leaning over the table as well. “Find anything useful?”

“Possibly. It remains to be seen.” Neloth lifted one of the open books off the table, quickly flipping through the pages. “A lot of what's written is purely speculative, not to mention the majority simply recounts the history of the staff, not the full scope of its power.”

“Would you like me to help?”

“What? No, no, of course not. This... Well,” he tugged at his beard. “Perhaps you could fetch me some tea?” Teldryn opened his mouth to protest, to remind Neloth that he wasn't his damn steward, but Urag was already walking towards him.

“I'll show you where my cooking hearth is. Come on.” Teldryn followed the orc numbly, grinding his teeth together in frustration.

“Canis-root, if you have it!” Neloth called after them, and Teldryn wanted to pour hot tea over the damn mer's head.

## Chapter End Notes

Teldryn's prayer to Azura was taken from [this post on r/teslore](#) - I thought it was incredibly beautiful.





## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas/Happy Yule/Festive Wednesday! Have the gift of an early update!

(Thanks again to Obsi and Syl for the beta work!)

Book after book, and Neloth hadn't learned much that he didn't already know. Not to mention that anything that referenced the Arms of Chaos repeated the same thing over and over: that they were destroyed by their creator – lost to the annals of time. If that was the case, then why had he heard...

Neloth straightened up, closing the book he'd been reading with more force than necessary. His toes and fingers were starting to go numb from the cold. Hours had passed as he'd toiled away in Urag's library dungeon. He was finding nothing but dead ends; not to mention Teldryn brewed a terrible cup of tea. Neloth sighed, setting the book down and leaning back in the stiff wooden chair. He ran his hands over his eyes and twisted at the points of his ears in an attempt to warm them. Perhaps it *would* be best to return to the rumor mill instead – that was how he stumbled upon this information in the first place. He closed all the books that were still open and piled them neatly to one side of the table. His knees creaked and hips ached as he rose to his feet, pressing his knuckles into his low back, producing several loud pops.

Urag wasn't in his room when Neloth emerged from the cellar. He resisted the urge to rummage through the mer's belongings and instead finished his hike up the cramped spiral staircase. The wards on the Arcanaeum door were child's play, and Neloth took them down and recast them in half the time it had taken Urag. The library was mostly empty, save for a couple of tired-looking students. Urag grunted to Neloth in greeting as he strode by, but otherwise barely acknowledged him.

"Do you know where Teldryn is?"

Urag looked up. "I thought I saw him and the Arch-Mage walking the grounds."

"Of course," Neloth muttered. "Savos has always been the type to fall victim to hero-worship." He swept out of the library, ignoring Urag's confused expression and making his way towards the main lecture hall.

The old Nord mage, Tolfdur, was just finishing up with a lecture on basic wards and spell-blocking. Neloth's curiosity got the better of him. He settled in to watch as a student shakily cast lesser ward to barely block a weak magelight, gently tossed at them like a toy ball. Neloth scoffed. It would take these students hundreds of years to become proper mages at this rate, with the professors coddling them like fragile newborns. Cast a fireball - then they would learn. The fear of painful, agonizing death works wonders for producing students capable of thinking on their feet. Neloth leaned back against the inner wall, content to listen to the rest of the lecture.

Many of the students eyed him wearily once the class was over, giving him a wide berth as they exited the hall. Two oblivious Bretons were chattering away as they passed, snickering behind their hands.

"I dare you to," one said.

"No way. I don't have a death wish."

"Come on," the first one goaded. "You're not even a little bit curious? Strange rituals happening atop a glacier? Could be fun." Neloth's ears perked up.

"Pardon me," he strode out of the shadows, their expressions turning frightful as he approached.

"Are you a new professor?" one asked.

"Azura, no!" Neloth laughed and waved off the comment. "Your little school could only be so fortunate. No, I'm much more interested in what you were just daring your friend here to do. What strange rituals atop glaciers?"

"Oh." The smaller of the pair scratched at his chin. "Uh, it's just a rumor."

"Rumors often lead to fantastical ends," Neloth insisted with a grin.

"Some of the other students have claimed to see bright flashes of green light coming from Skytemple Ruins," the taller one supplied, brushing hair out of her face. "I was just trying to get--"

"Excellent," Neloth interrupted. "Skytemple Ruins you say? Where might that be?"

"Uh... North of the College, just off the coast," the boy replied. He grabbed onto his friend's sleeve, beginning to steer her out of the room. "Anyway, we should go."

Neloth barely noticed them walk away, his mind already churning. Their little after-class gossip sounded similar to the original reports he had heard, but there was only one way to find out. Now, he just needed to find Teldryn.

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"So, let me see if I have everything straight." Teldryn, slightly out of breath, followed Neloth up the steep hill that led away from the town. Savos had drawn them a crude map after Neloth had inquired about Skytemple Ruins. Apparently, it was just north of the College, past Saarthal and along the coastline.

Teldryn let out a grunt as he stepped up the snowbank. "Not only did you neglect to tell me that you were on a wild goose-chase to find a staff that may or may not exist--"

"There are two staves," Neloth corrected.

"Right. *Two staves* that may or may not exist. But you came into this information by listening to the students gossip?" Teldryn let out a bark of a laugh that echoed off the craggy rocks. "You were right. I should have asked you for more money."

“Never underestimate the power of a rumor, Teldryn.” Neloth held up a finger. “Nor the ramblings of a madman.”

“The madman being you?”

“What!? No, you s’wit, the—I found one of Hermaeus Mora’s Black Books by refusing to dismiss what turned out to be an incredibly useful clue.” The cold air stung Neloth’s nostrils. He rubbed his hands together, creating small sparks of warmth between his palms. “My point being, all knowledge is useful. Sometimes, great rewards take great sacrifice.”

“Such as freezing your ash yams off in the far reaches of northern Skyrim.”

Neloth didn’t dignify Teldryn’s crudeness with an answer.

The Sarthal digging site was impressive, even from a distance. The students and teachers had really put in a great amount of work. Savos had mentioned that they’d hit a wall with progress, both literally and figuratively. It was no wonder; Nordic ruins were locked up tighter than a Dwemer puzzle box, crawling with undead. Neloth would take an ash spawn over a Draugr any day – ash spawn, at least, didn’t reek.

They slowly picked their way to the coastline, stopping once to share a small potion of resist cold that Teldryn had whipped up before they’d left. Neloth hadn’t expected much, but as it turned out Teldryn was relatively skilled with a mortar and pestle. It just went to show that low expectations can sometimes yield pleasant surprises. Neloth hummed appreciatively at the effects: blood and warmth rushing back into his extremities.

“I have two more of those, so we need to be sparing with them,” Teldryn reminded him as he shoved the empty bottle back into his satchel.

“Yes, yes, of course. Let’s get a move on.”

Horkers eyed them warily as they passed, barking and snorting from their icy plateaus. The air was heavy with the scent of salt and mineral, every now and then punctuated by the distinct smell of rotting clam meat. Neloth stepped carefully around the jagged rocks of the shoreline, simultaneously consulting his map and their terrain.

“There.” He pointed off in the distance. “That tall island should be it.”

“Well there certainly looks to be ruins atop it.” Teldryn had pushed his goggles onto the top of his helmet, squinting into the harsh white light of the cloud-covered sun. “How in the blazes are we supposed to get over there. Swim?”

“Certainly not,” Neloth scoffed. As they approached, however, that unfortunately seemed to be the case.

“Oblivion take me before I dip a single toe into that water,” Teldryn protested with a shudder.

“Oh, do try to be less of a priss.”

“Me? I’m the priss?” Teldryn laughed harder than Neloith thought necessary. He pointedly turned away from the mer, scowling at the island.

“Hand me another potion.”

“Absolutely not.” Teldryn crossed his arms. “We don’t even know if that’s the correct island.”

“Look!” Neloith shoved the crudely drawn map under Teldryn’s nose. “If you have a better guess, by all means, elaborate. I would rather waste as little time as possible, and that includes wandering about aimlessly. Now, *hand me another potion* .”

Teldryn glared at him, tugging his scarf down and away from his mouth as he handed the map back, sliding their pack from his shoulders and forcefully rummaging through its contents. They shared the second to last potion, and without thinking about it too hard, Neloith began to wade into the water.

“You’re absolutely mad,” he heard Teldryn muttered from the shore, but soon felt the ripples of the water at his back.

They pulled themselves ashore, waterlogged and chilled despite the potion. Neloith taught Teldryn a quick spell he’d made up himself – one that harnessed the natural connection to fire that all Dunmer possessed. With a snapping flourish, Neloith pushed the heat at his core outwards, creating a cloud of steam around his body as his clothes and skin dried almost instantly.

“Y’know, that’s actually quite useful,” Teldryn admitted after successfully casting the spell himself. “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it,” Neloith replied with a wave of his hand. “What use would you be to me if you turned into an icicle, hmm?”

“Right.” Teldryn sounded amused, possibly even smug. Neloith ignored him, choosing instead to press further up the hill. As they approached the summit, a noise caught his attention and he quickly dropped into a crouch, holding up a hand. Teldryn’s foot fall ceased and Neloith heard the muted sound of a sword slowly being removed from the sheath. A casting of detect life revealed nothing. Neloith switched the spell; the rolling wave of red magicka lit up three figures at the top of the hill. Skeletons.

“Ah,” Neloith exhaled, righting himself. “Just skeletons. Come along.”

“Shouldn’t we–?” Teldryn didn’t get to finish his sentence. Neloith was already gathering fire between his palms. As he crested the hill, the skeletons turned to him, raising their weapons, their joints creaking and popping.

“That won’t be necessary. This will be over very quickly!” Neloith called, hurling the enormous fireball into the center of the group. It exploded with intense light and force, scattering the bones of the pathetic undead to the four corners of the island. He watched with a small, satisfied smile as one of the skulls went rolling down the hill at a tremendous speed, plunking loudly into the icy waters.

“Alright, let’s see here...” Neloith strode through the ruins, heading for the large barrow on the far side of the hill. “Strange rituals... clearly a bit of necromancy. Hopefully, that’s not all they were doing. That would be such a waste of my time.” Something caught his eye as he stepped into the tomb, a shape poking out of a small alcove – the edge of a cloak, the sole of a boot. “Ah, yes, here

we are.”

Teldryn finally caught up to him, sword at the ready.

“Oh. Are they dead?”

“Appears to be that way.”

A crumpled body lay before an altar. Candles were still burning, the drippings of wax puddling into frozen mounds at their base. A soul gem pulsed faintly in a scone, next to which lay a journal, bookmarked with a dagger. Neloath stepped around the body to inspect the contents on the table, excitement rippling along his spine like fire.

There they were: the Arms of Chaos.

“By Azura...” Neloath whispered softly, picking up one of the staves to get a closer look. It was clearly dead, broken and useless... but nothing Neloath's staff enchanter couldn't remedy. Teldryn bent to inspect the corpse.

“I don't know what killed her,” he murmured. “She looks as though she simply laid down and went to sleep.”

“Yes, yes, it's very sad.” Neloath set his staff back down. “I believe this was her journal.”

“Neloath, you're not the least bit concerned?”

Neloath looked down at Teldryn then. He still knelt on the ground, scarf hanging loosely around his neck. “Concerned with what? Another dead mage? Do you know how many dead mages I've found in my lifetime?”

“Honestly, I don't want to know,” Teldryn grumbled, pushing to his feet with a groan. “What's the journal say?”

Neloath was skimming it before the last word even left Teldryn's mouth. He licked his finger to turn the page.

“It appears this particular dead mage was named Hyenril. She was apprenticed to a Master Ellane... and apparently her master was the one attempting to reforge the Arms of Chaos.” He flipped a page. “It was my master's obsession, et cetera, et cetera... tirelessly working to power the staves, et cetera... Ah!” He pointed at the page. “It appears that the next step in restoring the staves required attaining three sigil stones: one for each staff and...” Neloath scanned the altar, pushing aside some of the items. He looked back at the book. “That's odd. It mentions something called a Warlock's Mark. I can't say I've ever heard of such a thing.”

“Perhaps this?” Teldryn held a necklace up to the light.

Neloath took the necklace from Teldryn's extended hand, inspecting it. The silverwork was intricate, precise. On closer inspection, there was an empty space at the center of the pendant. “I believe you might be right.” Without a Sigil Stone it was simply a normal necklace. Neloath



pocketed it.

“So how are we supposed to get our hands on not one, but *three* Sigil Stones? Last I checked, they aren’t exactly lying around. And getting one usually requires dealing with Dremora.”

“Well, lucky for us, the journal mentions that Hyenril’s master happened to have a ring of summoning.” Neloth flipped the page. “Which is fortunate because those types of items are incredibly difficult to come... by...” He trailed off as he read the last entry in the journal.

“What?” Teldryn leaned in, trying to look over Neloth’s shoulder. Neloth closed his eyes as he snapped the journal shut, taking a long breath and exhaling slowly.

“It appears,” he looked down at the corpse with distaste, “that this incompetent apprentice shipped Master Ellane’s dead body to be buried in her home country of High Rock.” He sucked at his teeth. “And neglected to remove the ring from her finger.”

“Please, for the love of Azura, don’t tell me we’re going to hike all the way to High Rock to rob a grave.”

“Perhaps not. The journal entry concerning her master’s body is only dated as of last week..” Neloth clucked his tongue as he thought. “That the coffin may still be at the Windhelm docks, depending on shipping schedules. For once, the East Empire Company’s legendary inefficiency might actually work in our favor.”

“So, back to Windhelm then?” Teldryn groaned. “I don’t know which is worse.”

“Come now, Teldryn.” Neloth grinned. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Notes

Happy New Year everyone!! Hope you enjoy the chapter!  
(Thank you, Obsi, for the beta work!)

### **Bonus art at the end!**

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When they returned to the College, Neloth insisted that they begin to pack their things.

“We can’t afford a moment’s delay.” He carefully wrapped the staves in animal furs before tying them tightly together. “If there’s a chance the coffin is still at the docks, then time is of the essence. We should leave as soon as possible.” Teldryn sighed in response, sorting through the empty bottles at the bottom of his pack. He needed to replenish their potions.

There were four essential draughts for any Skyrim spellsworn: resist cold, healing, magicka, and stamina regeneration. Neloth had ridiculed him for carrying such an extensive supply, but Teldryn refused to be swayed. Restoration was not his strong suit and he knew from experience that a strong potion at the right time could save a life.

“Well, I’m going to need to use an alchemy station first. We drank the last of my snowberry draught on the way back from Skytemple. And we’ll need to stop for the night on the way. I propose we set out at dawn tomorrow morning—”

“I think not!” Neloth protested. “Remember what I said about sleep?”

“Yes, I remember, and, may I remind you? We’re going to be on foot this time. There are no carriages from Winterhold, only *to* Winterhold. It’s going to take us nearly two full days to reach Windhelm regardless.” He shoved his spare clothes aggressively back into his satchel. “And I don’t care how much you’ve trained, I still need sleep to function. We’re stopping at the Nightgate Inn.”

“One day’s delay could mean the difference between a simple journey to Windhelm and a ship to High Rock.”

“We’re staying at the Nightgate Inn,” Teldryn repeated. “If we miss the shipment by a day, then...” He thought for a moment. “I’ll make you tea whenever you want it. Without complaint.”

“You make a dreadful cup of tea,” Neloth retorted, but he turned thoughtful. “Rather, you should let me test a new spell on you.”

“What!?” Teldryn sputtered. “Absolutely not.”

“Then we don’t stop.”

“That’s completely unfair.”

“It’s just a simple spell.”

Teldryn threw his hands in the air. “Sure! Alright! Fine. If we miss the shipment by one, single day,” he held up a finger to illustrate, “then I shall be your humble test subject.”

“Leaving so soon?”

Both Teldryn and Neloth both jumped, jerking to look in the direction of the voice. Ancano stood in the doorway, his hands tucked behind his back.

“Ah, yes, such as my research demands.” Neloth straightened his sleeves, smoothing out the wrinkles in his robes – a compulsive habit Teldryn had begun to notice.

“I heard your research led you up to Skytemple Ruins today,” Ancano continued, attempting to sound bored. “Find anything interesting?”

“A dead body and a dead end.” Neloth narrowed his eyes. “Would you possibly be able to direct my companion here to the nearest alchemy table?” Teldryn jolted as the attention in the room shifted to him. Ancano’s eyes were a sickly yellow, reminding Teldryn of the festering pus of a wound.

“Of course.” He bowed formally. “Right this way.” Teldryn and Neloth shared a nervous look, but Teldryn nodded and followed Ancano. The Alchemy station was up the stairs and a few rooms over in the Hall of Countenance.

“Will you be needing any ingredients?” Ancano asked, somehow making a simple offer sound like an insult to Teldryn’s skills.

“No, thank you. I believe I have everything I need.”

“Very well. Safe travels.”

Teldryn watched Ancano leave, listening until his footsteps faded down the stairs, through the first level, and out the door. He let out a long, slow breath, letting his pack fall to the floor. Pulling out his smaller alchemy pouch, he thumbed through his ingredients with care. Neloth appeared in the doorway moments later, leaning against the frame, arms crossed.

“I don’t like that fellow.”

Teldryn laughed. “Well, we finally have something in common, then.”

“He’s too nosy for his own good.”

“I think he’s a bit more than nosy.” Teldryn crushed up the dried snowberries, slowly adding purple mountain flower petals.

“What do you mean?” Neloth asked as he walked into the room, peering over Teldryn’s shoulder to watch him work.

“He’s a Thalmor ambassador.” Teldryn shrugged. “Which means he’s probably just an agent.”

“You think he’s a spy, sending information back to the Dominion?” Neloth straightened up, looking over his shoulder towards the door.

“Are you really so out of touch? It’s obvious.”

“Savos doesn’t seem too concerned.”

“Savos doesn’t have the luxury of choice,” Teldryn corrected. “He’s more concerned with keeping his students safe and out of the war.”

“Oh, yes, I heard you two were galavanting about the yard this morning,” Neloth jeered. “Becoming fast friends with the Arch-Mage? Or perhaps you were looking to have your ego stroked.”

Teldryn ignored him long enough for Neloth to get bored and wander off. With a deep sigh, he returned his attention to the task at hand: the rhythmic grinding of the pestle, the soft crunch of berry and leaf under stone. Alchemy was very much a form of meditation – predictable, repetitive movements requiring all of his focus. When Teldryn was at the alchemy table he rarely had to think of anything else. Once the final potions were mixed, corked, and settling, Teldryn wiped his forehead on the back of his sleeve and wandered back downstairs. Neloth was busy scribbling away in his journal, hunched over one of the comically small end tables.

“The potions need to rest. I made a couple of extra potent ones with the last of my last ice wraith teeth.” Neloth just hummed in response, continuing to scribble, and Teldryn assumed he wasn’t actually listening.

“What are you writing?”

“Hmm?” Neloth looked up. “Oh, I’m jotting down some notes about that Ancano fellow. Just to be safe.” He finished scribbling a sentence, pointedly dotting the period before blowing on the page. “For once, I find myself regretting knowing very little of modern politics. The last thing I remember about the Thalmor was something about showing up with a cart full of severed heads.”

“You don’t need to be well-versed in the politics of Skyrim to know that mer is up to no good.”

Neloth hummed in agreement. “Well, luckily we won’t have to deal with him anymore, at least for a while. I propose we leave before dawn. Draw as little attention to our departure as possible.”

“Well, then get out of my room and let me rest.”

“Oh.” Neloth looked around. “I forgot this wasn’t my room. Very well.” He rose to his feet, closing his journal with a snap before tucking it under his arm. “I’ll wake you in six hours.” Teldryn suppressed a groan.

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The borealis was out in full as they crossed the crumbling bridge and trudged through the silent town. The wind and snow had died down, leaving an eerie calm in its wake. Their boots crunched loudly in the freshly fallen snow; a wolf howled somewhere off in the distance, answered by another shortly after, both too far away to raise any alarm. Neither Teldryn nor Neloth spoke. The silence of the liminal period before dawn was sacred – the realm of Azura. Teldryn said a silent

prayer for the journey ahead of them.

The snowbanks reflected the colors of the sky, greens and blues rippling across the ground as they marched along in silence. The wind picked back up once they rounded the first bend in the road, heading more directly west. The sky was beginning to pinken with the hint of early morning, and Teldryn stopped to look behind them, catching the first gleaming rays of the sun peeking over the far mountains to the east. He thought distantly of Morrowind, feeling a tug of homesickness he hadn't experienced in decades, and quickly turned around, striding briskly to Neloth's side. Dawn had broken, and so, too, had Neloth's silence.

He rambled almost endlessly; making observations, planning aloud, randomly insulting people Teldryn had never even heard of. For the most part, Teldryn was able to tune him out. He watched a pair of snow birds fly after one another, swooping upwards and disappearing amidst the icy rocks near the top of the mountain.

"Teldryn, are you listening?"

"What?" Teldryn looked back at Neloth. "No, I really wasn't. You've been talking for hours."

Neloth scoffed. "That's a bit of an exaggeration. Nevertheless, as I was saying... Getting the ring of summoning is going to be the easy part. The difficulty lies in the ritual that is to follow."

"How so?" Teldryn felt like playing along. It made the time pass more quickly, at least.

"As you pointed out yesterday, acquiring a Sigil Stone usually involves dealing with Dremora. Now, Sigil Stones are generally used to sustain a bridge between Oblivion and Mundus, but the rub lies in the fact that you need access to Oblivion in order to obtain a Sigil Stone."

"I lived through the Oblivion Crisis," Teldryn reminded him. "You don't have to explain that to me."

"Right, right. Simply a force of habit. I'm used to being around far younger mer. Moreover, I'm curious to see if we can possibly find this... Master Ellane's notes. Her useless apprentice probably wouldn't be able to tell the difference between a Sigil Stone and a kwama egg, but something tells me the woman was onto something. It's one of my own personal theories that a Sigil Stone can be used for far more than simply acting as a bridge between planes, but as a source of power."

"Like a Welkynd Stone, then?" Teldryn kicked a rock, watching it skitter across the cobbles and plop into a snowbank.

"Almost!" Neloth actually sounded excited, and Teldryn couldn't help but find it mildly endearing. "But a Welkynd Stone's storage of magicka is finite: it simply crumples to dust after its stores have been depleted. But a Sigil Stone..." Neloth rubbed his hands together, either out of excitement or to warm them up. "You have the power of Oblivion in the palm of your hand. An endless supply of power."

"That sounds like a death wish," Teldryn paused thoughtfully. "And exactly like something you'd be insane enough to attempt."

"Come now," Neloth tutted. "No great leaps of knowledge were ever made without some amount of calculated risk."

They reached the Nightgate Inn as the sun was beginning to set. Teldryn's legs were sore, his damaged foot aching terribly with each step; his fingers and toes were frozen and his stomach churned with hunger, as if a tiny beast were trapped inside of him and was slowly attempting to gnaw its way out. The small lunch of dried meat and bread they'd shared had barely held him through the majority of their journey. He was tired. He was hungry. He wanted a gods-damned bath.

"Is there a single establishment in this country that doesn't look fit to fall apart at any second?" Neloth asked, stomping snow off his shoes on the inn's front porch.

"They're warm on the inside, and that's all that matters to me." Teldryn was knocking his own boots against a post. "I just hope they have somewhere I can take a hot bath."

"Nords don't bathe," Neloth huffed. "I thought you knew that."

"That's a cruel stereotype."

"Is it? Did you smell some of those little heathens running around the College?" Neloth shuddered. Teldryn pushed past him, opening the door to the Inn.

The rolling heat of the central hearthfire was a welcome relief from the elements, and Teldryn let out a groan, immediately gravitating towards it. He tugged off his gloves and set them on the ground, putting his hands as close to the fire as he could, clenching and spreading his fingers, coaxing life back into them.

"Oh, that is quite nice," Neloth sighed, joining Teldryn by the fire and mimicking his actions. "Of course, we could have been a tad more comfortable had you not been so stingy with the potions."

"We still have a whole day's journey ahead of us," Teldryn retorted. "They're for keeping us from freezing, not keeping us comfortable."

"I'm starting to think you're a bit of a masochist."

Teldryn grinned behind his scarf, chuckling a bit.

To Teldryn's great relief, and smug satisfaction, the inn actually had a small area in their cellar for bathing. He paid the innkeeper for two bowls of stew and an hour's use of the washroom.

"Give me about a half hour to get it ready." The innkeeper's accent was thick, the usual Nordic lilt making even the most mundane sentence sound like a poem. Teldryn nodded in response before walking the food over to where Neloth sat, hunched over his and the apprentice's journals.

"Transferring notes?" Teldryn asked, setting the bowl down in front of him.

"More like trying to make sense of them." He swept the journals to the side, pulling the steaming bowl of soup closer. "Thank you."

Teldryn almost said 'you're welcome' out of habit, but the words stuck in his throat. Instead, he



blinked dumbly at Neloeth. “Did you just thank me for something?”

Neloeth had the spoon halfway to his mouth when he paused dramatically. He pursed his lips, brow creasing. “I suppose I did. Perhaps I’m more tired than I realized.”

Teldryn threw his head back to laugh and it took him longer to stop than he would have liked. He wiped a bit of wetness from the corner of his eye. “I think I’m a bit delirious...”

“Clearly.” Neloeth smirked. They ate their food in one of the more amicable silences they’d shared thus far.

Teldryn nearly fell asleep in the bath, soaking until his fingers pruned and the water turned tepid. The dirt and grime had risen to the top, and he grimaced as he stepped out, ashamed that he’d managed to go so long without a proper wash. The cold of the cellar hit him like a slap making him shiver violently, drying off and put on fresh clothes as quickly as he could. His feet dragged across the floorboards as he trudged back up the stairs and into their room. He fell face-first onto his bed with a grunt, sluggishly attempting to kick off his boots. Neloeth sat cross-legged on his own bed, the two journals spread out before him, scribbling into his own notebook as he flipped between the pages of the apprentice’s.

“Not even going to try to sleep?” Teldryn asked through the side of his mouth, his face contorted by the roughspun pillow.

“Perhaps I’ll doze for an hour if I’m feeling indulgent. But please, do get your beauty rest.” Neloeth dismissed him with a flick of his wrist, and truthfully, Teldryn didn’t need to be told twice. He’d just managed to situate himself beneath the furs before losing consciousness.

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Teldryn jolted awake, a hand placed firmly over his mouth.

“Don’t move,” Neloeth whispered, inches from his face. “We were followed.”

The room had grown cold during the night. The door to their room was closed, but Teldryn saw movement from beneath it – the shadow of a person standing just outside.

“Start gathering your things,” Neloeth continued, slowly removing his hand.

“Followed by who?” Teldryn asked lowly.

“I don’t know, but they’ve been standing outside of our door for nearly twenty minutes. I don’t know what they’re waiting for, or when they might try to come in.”

“Is it morning?”

“Not quite. Maybe two or three hours before dawn.” Neloeth was already beginning to shove things into his pack, re-securing the staves. Teldryn threw back the covers and immediately began to don his armor. In his sleep-addled rush, his helmet slipped from his fingers, clattering loudly to the floor. He cursed under his breath, freezing. There was a knock at the door. Neloeth sighed loudly,

rubbing at his temples.

“Keep packing,” he whispered harshly, striding over to the door and opening it only a crack.

“What’s the meaning of this? Do you have any idea what time it is?” Teldryn had to give it to his acting skills; Neloth definitely sounded like a mer who’d just had his sleep interrupted.

“I apologize for bothering you so late.” It was a prim, Altmeri accent; a melodic, male voice. Teldryn felt his pulse quicken. “But I’m following up on a report of—”

“Couldn’t it wait until morning?” Neloth demanded.

“I heard stirring, and since we’d only just arrived—”

“Only just arrived?” Neloth laughed. “You’ve been hovering outside our door for almost half an hour. In the dead of night. Now state your business immediately and allow us to go back to sleep.” There was a long pause.

“As I was saying,” the Altmer began again, his tone icy, “I’m following up on a report that you and your traveling companion may be in possession of illegal Daedric artifacts.”

“Illegal according to who, exactly?” Neloth argued. “We’re both Dunmer. Citizens of Morrowind, mind you.”

“That may very well be, but when you crossed the border into Skyrim you became subject to the rule of the Empire, and, by extension, the Dominion. And under the White-Gold Concordat, the possession of any items used for worship outside of the Eight Divines is considered contraband.” A pause. “Now, if you’ve nothing to hide, then you’ll have no problem with me and my fellow Justicar here having a quick look—”

“Out of the question,” Neloth snapped. “This is absurd, to wake two old mer, who are simply in Skyrim for academic research, on false claims of—”

“Sir,” a second Altmeri voice, female. “If you continue to resist we will be left with no other option than to use force.”

Neloth let out a bark of a laugh, the hand with which held the door beginning to glow with swirling, electrical blue energy. “I’d certainly like to see you try!” Faster than Teldryn could process, Neloth had slammed the door in the Thalmor’s faces, surging electricity through the door itself and out the otherside. Teldryn heard the two mer cry out, followed by the clattering of wood and metal.

“Hurry!” Neloth urged, dashing for his pack. “I doubt that will have done much—”

The door blasted open, ripped from its hinges. The two agents stormed in, casting wards and charging shock spells. Teldryn barely had enough time to cast a quick armor spell himself before he was struck in the chest with a jolt of electricity. He bit down hard on his tongue, tasting blood, and quickly unsheathing one of the small daggers from his belt, hurling it at one of the agents. It lodged itself in the mer’s shoulder, causing him to fumble and drop his charges. Neloth had his own ward up, blocking the other agent’s attacks while sending out one of his own. Teldryn didn’t dare use a fire spell in an old wooden building like this one, and the last he wanted was to commit murder in the dead of night. He unsheathed Trueflame and charged the mer attacking Neloth, using the flat of his blade to push her off her feet. He felt another jolt of electricity hit his back, dulled by his magical armor. The other agent had regained his footing.

“Teldryn, out of the way!”

Without a second thought, Teldryn ducked and rolled to the left, springing backwards just in time to dodge the massive sweep of Neloth's sickly green spell. The two agents immediately went stiff, their eyes glazing over in shock as their arms and legs locked up, sending them toppling sideways like frozen corpses.

"Halt!" A guard had appeared in the doorway, sword drawn. "You have committed crimes against Skyrim and her people. What say you in your defense?"

Teldryn shuffled to his feet and sheathed Trueflame, his head throbbing. Neloth dropped his spell charges, slowly raising his palms to either side of his head in submission.

"Ah, yes, such a terrible turn of events. I suppose we're under arrest, yes? Let us just grab our possessions..." Neloth jerked his head for Teldryn to get his pack, which he did with no small amount of wariness. Once Neloth's own pack was secured, he turned to the guard with a far-too pleasant smile.

"Alright, shall we go to jail then?"

"Come quietly and—"

Without warning, Neloth lunged for Teldryn, wrapping him up in one arm and the room immediately went black, accompanied by one of the most unpleasant feelings Teldryn had ever experienced – as if they were falling very fast from a very great height, spinning wildly, surrounded by light and sound and color. It was over as fast as it began, and Teldryn wobbled away from Neloth, pulled down his scarf, and promptly vomited into a snowbank.

They were outside.

"Oh thank Azura that worked," Neloth declared a bit breathlessly. "I haven't attempted to teleport someone else along with me in well over two hundred years. There was a small chance you could have been ripped in half." Teldryn spit into the snow, pushing off his knees and wiping his mouth in the crook of his arm before resealing his scarf. The Nightgate Inn was nowhere to be seen.

"Where in bloody Oblivion did you send us?"

"Simply a mile away from where we just were. I'm not exactly sure where, though. It's hard to plan these things when I'm unsure of the destination. But we need to hurry. I'm sure they'll catch up sooner rather than later."

The night air bit at Teldryn's face through his scarf and helmet. The pervasive nausea of being ripped through liminal space refused to go away, and the sour taste of bile lingered on the back of his tongue. Still he pushed forward, following the glow of Neloth's guidance spell. It wormed its way through the tall pines like an ethereal snake, casting a cool, misty light off the thick tree trunks. Neloth was breathing heavily in the silence of the snowy forest, having to drop his spell every now and then, only to recast it.

"Do you think it was Ancano?" Teldryn asked after a long stretch of silence.

"I don't know. I can't remember what he looks like," Neloth replied, cursing as his spell failed again.

"No, not the... I meant do you think Ancano sent them."

“Oh. I suppose so. It would mean he’s a bit cleverer than I...” Neloth took a heaving breath, stopping to rest a hand against one of the tree trunks.

“Are you alright?”

“What? Oh, yes, yes... I’m just a bit.” Neloth cast a short spell that flared a bright, dangerous red. He hissed, flinching. “As I said, I just haven’t attempted a teleportation spell in a long time. I simply forgot how taxing it can be on my magicka reserves.”

“We should stop for the night.” Teldryn cast mage light and slid his pack from his shoulders, digging through its contents for his potions.

“Not necessary.” Neloth straightened up, digging his knuckles into his back then shaking out his hands. It was then that Teldryn noticed Neloth’s fingers turning black at the tips.

“You’re overextending your magicka,” he argued with an accusatory point. “I can see it.”

“I just need to rest for a moment. Nothing more.”

“Drink this.” Teldryn procured a blue bottle from his pack and shoved it in Neloth’s direction.

“I don’t need it.”

“Drink it! You stubborn...” Teldryn let out a low growl. “I will force that potion down your throat if you don’t drink it.”

“Must you always resort to violence?” Neloth snatched it from his hand, struggling with the cork. Teldryn ended up yanking it out impatiently with his teeth. He stood, arms crossed, watching Neloth’s throat bob as he drank the potion with a grimace. Somewhere off in the forest a clump of snow fell from a tree branch, creating a soft whump amidst the silence. After the last gulp, Neloth opened his mouth and stuck his tongue out like a petulant child. “Satisfied?” The color had begun to return to his fingers.

“Very.” Teldryn uncrossed his arms. “You’re not immortal, you know.”

“Don’t remind me.” Neloth cast a proper healing spell on himself with a contented sigh. “Alright, let’s continue.” His guidance spell flared back to life, snaking forward through the trees once again. With a heavy sigh, Teldryn slung his pack back over his shoulder and trudged after him.

They moved even deeper into the woods where the snow was ankle deep and downy soft. Each step was a fight to pull the next foot forward, leaving long tracks behind them that Teldryn hoped would be gone within a day. Silence pushed in on all sides, broken only by the soft, shimmering pulse of Neloth’s magicka and the occasional hoot of an owl, perched somewhere off in the distant treetops. Teldryn’s leg muscles were aching, each step sending a spike of pain through his low back.

“Neloth,” he nearly pleaded.

“No, no need, I agree,” Neloth began breathlessly before Teldryn could say anything else. “Let’s just try to find the road, at the very least.”

When the snow began to thin and Teldryn saw the first sign of the cobbled road peeking between the distant tree trunks, he nearly laughed with relief.

“Finally.” He swung his arms in small circles, groaning as his shoulders protested, knees trembling. “Please, for the love of Azura, let me rest for at least an hour before we go further.” The sky was beginning to lighten, soft birdsong echoing through the branches.

“Yes, yes,” Neloth agreed, still sounding agitated, but equally tired. “Find us a place to set up camp.”

Twenty minutes later, Teldryn had managed to construct a small lean-to a few hundred feet from the main road as Neloth procured a fire. They warmed some of their food in silence, exhausted beyond the point of bickering as the fire popped and hissed from the bits of wet wood they’d fed it. Teldryn undid his armor enough to lie comfortably in his sleeping roll, scarf wrapped tightly around his head, as Neloth lined their camp with runes and wards.

“Just a few hours,” he reminded Teldryn as he settled down into his own sleeping roll, putting a respectable amount of space between them despite the cold. Teldryn didn’t bother with a response, already half way to sleep.

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The cold woke Teldryn before Neloth did, his limbs stiff and aching, his nose running, the points of his ears frozen and raw. He grunted, rolling onto his back to stare up at the tattered canvas of the lopsided lean-to, sunlight bleeding through from directly above them. It must have been near noon. He looked to his left to see Neloth still fast asleep, curled as tightly into a ball as he could possibly get, his own scarf pulled up and over his head. The old mer’s face was more relaxed than usual, yet still managed to have a pinched expression to it, his lips drawn tight.

Teldryn let out an amused huff. “Just an hour, he said.”

Neloth blinked blearily awake. “Wha—” He sat up with a groan, rubbing at his eyes with his knuckles. It was one of the more humanizing moments Teldryn had ever witnessed.

“How do you feel?”

Neloth pushed his scarf back with a hiss. “Fucking cold, how do you think?” Teldryn barked a laugh at the rare use of a curse, reaching for his helmet and beginning to re-buckle his armor. Neloth performed the quick spell he’d taught Teldryn on the shore of Skytemple Ruins, prompting Teldryn to do the same. The sudden blast of warmth into his extremities was almost painful, and he clenched his jaw with a groan, suddenly able to feel his fingers and toes again. They broke down the camp in relative silence, Neloth grumbling to himself under his breath the entire time.

“Wait,” he commanded sharply as Teldryn made to head towards the road. Neloth cast a spell that rippled outwards in a wave of red energy, rolling across the snow and lapping at the tree trunks. He scanned the horizon with unfocused eyes.

“Just some rabbits, possibly a sleeping bear in that hillside over there. Otherwise, all clear.”

The sun was setting at their backs as they rounded the final bend, the high stone walls of Windhelm finally within their sight. Icy water babbled loudly beneath them as they crossed the stone bridge that lead them to the city's gates. Teldryn felt his heart growing heavier with each step. They'd have to find a place to stay for the night, which was a whole ordeal in and of itself, once again. He sighed loudly and Neloth waved a hand dismissively.

"Yes, yes, I know."

They'd barely spoken for the majority of the day outside of clipped questions and observations, and Teldryn got the feeling that Neloth was just as tired as he was.

"I'm not happy to be back here either," Neloth added.

"I was just wondering where we were going to stay."

"Blasted Nords," Neloth cursed under his breath.

The moment they passed through the gates, they headed towards the Grey Quarters, eyes cast downward. A drunken Nord was stumbling through the winding streets, shouting any racial slur that seemed to come to him.

"Filthy knife-ears!" He slurred as they approached. "You're Imperial spies, I know it! Get out of our city!" He pulled his fist back, lurching towards Neloth as if to strike. Without even flinching, Neloth flicked a finger in the Nord's direction and the man went rigid, face paling as the paralyzing spell washed over him in a sickly green wave. He hit the cold stone with a heavy thump and Teldryn couldn't help but chuckle, not bothering to look back as they continued walking.

The New Gnisis Cornerclub did not have lodging, but Ambrys directed them to a ramshackled house where two small Dunmer women rented rooms for a fair price. Teldryn and Neloth were ushered silently in through the front door and into a small sitting room, tattered Hlaalu banners swaying gently on the walls from the rolling heat of the center hearthfire. One of the women set about making tea, while the other settled their payment for the night – her voice raspy, half-moon spectacles perched on the bridge of her crooked nose. Both of them were bent and weathered with age, their movements slow and deliberate. Teldryn knew they were probably younger than him, possibly by a good fifty, if not one hundred years younger. Possibly more. In a way he envied them, wondering distantly if the divines would ever allow him to properly age, if his affliction would doom him to outlive everyone he grew to love. He watched Neloth out of the corner of his eye as he paid for their room, wondering, not for the first time, how old the mer actually was. They took the hot tea offered them without fuss and agreed to sit around the small hearthfire for a moment, comfortable silence stretching between the four of them.

They were forced to share a room, but Teldryn was too tired to complain. Neloth was not.

"Any odd sleeping habits I should know about?" Neloth sneered as he began to remove his stiff pauldron. "No chance of accidentally setting the bed on fire?"

“I should ask the same of you,” Teldryn deflected. “Do I have to worry about any random tentacles manifesting out of your eyes?” Neloth didn’t reply, grumbling something under his breath and jerking his scarf free. He draped it neatly over the back of a chair, followed by his formal outer robe. Teldryn stripped down to his thin under shirt and pants, pulling back the roughspun covers of the bed irritably.

“Why *did* you get all those tattoos?” Neloth pressed. “You didn’t actually join the Tong, did you?”

“Again, Neloth,” Teldryn sighed, settling onto the mattress, punching the lumpy pillow into something usable. “If you actually cared, I’d answer your questions. But you don’t. So leave it be.” Once again, Neloth didn’t reply.

They each slept clinging to the edges of the bed as if the other were poisonous. Teldryn had turbulent dreams and woke to Neloth roughly shaking his shoulder, the light of dawn barely peeking through the long, narrow windows of the old stone house.

“Do you even know what time the East Empire Company’s offices open?” Teldryn grumbled, jerking away from Neloth’s grip and curling back around his pillow.

“Are you that determined to be my test subject?”

“Are you that determined to see me to an early grave?” Teldryn shot back. He yawned and stretched his arms up over his head, arching his back, and once he started he could stop, rolling over and groaning with satisfaction as his body responded in a symphony of pops and cracks. Neloth watched the display with a curled lip.

“Just be ready in half an hour.” He was already up, packed, and fully dressed. “I’m going downstairs to see if our hostesses have tea that isn’t repugnant.”

Teldryn stared at the ceiling for a long moment after Neloth had swept from the room and closed the door a bit too loudly behind him. Dust motes drifted through the shafts of light that streamed through the rippling glass of the windows, creating small pockets of warmth across the old floorboards and worn bed sheets. He took a deep breath, centered himself, and rose to meet the day.

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## Chapter End Notes

I've been trying to draw some more scenes that kind of correspond to the story - so hopefully I'll be able to slap those in here going forward!

Feel free to follow me on instagram! @thana.topsy  
I'm also thana-topsy on tumblr, but I've been using it less and less.

Thanks so much for reading! As always, comments are not only appreciated, but strongly desired. { '▽ ` } Tell me what you like! What you're excited about! I love to hear from readers.

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Notes

Thanks to [FourCatProductions](#) for the fantastic beta work. <3

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Neloth had hoped he wouldn't have to smell the salty brine and tang of fish and sea-slick docks until they were ready to set sail back for Solstheim. Yet here they were, back at Windhelm's port, loitering while they waited for the East Empire Company to unlock its damn doors. He'd suggested breaking in, but Teldryn had refused, citing the fact that they most likely already had a bounty on their heads from the instance at the Nightgate Inn two nights ago. Neloth couldn't care less about bounties and laws in a primitive country such as Skyrim, but even he would admit that Teldryn was most likely correct. Admit it to himself, that is. Not out loud.

Finally, an Imperial man in slightly better kempt robes than everyone else on the docks approached the offices, a large key ring swaying on his belt. He was whistling some sort of jaunty sea tune that died on his lips as he laid eyes on Teldryn and Neloth. He clutched nervously at the amulet on his chest and cleared his throat.

"May I help you?"

"I certainly hope so," Neloth began. "We're inquiring after a ship that may or may not have already left for High Rock. It was carrying the body of a woman by the name of Ellane, to be taken back for a proper Breton burial."

The man crossed his arms. "Why would two dark elves be asking after a Breton corpse?" He made no move to open the door.

"She was my apprentice," Neloth lied without a second thought. "And she decided to die with several of my possessions still on her person."

"You don't sound very sorry for her loss."

Neloth scoffed. "What use would it be to walk around weeping all day? My mourning of her death has come and passed, and now I would like my things back."

The Imperial didn't look convinced, but unhooked the ring from his belt regardless, thumbing through the myriad keys before selecting the proper one. Neloth took note as to which one. The door opened with no amount of fanfare and the three of them strode inside.

"By the three," Neloth exclaimed before he could help himself. "What kind of establishment might you call this?" Teldryn elbowed him none-too-subtly in the ribs. Neloth shot him an angry look. The 'offices' looked more like an abandoned warehouse – bare tables, dusty, cobweb-filled

corners, scattered papers thrown haphazardly about. Neloth wasn't sure they'd be able to find anything of use in this place.

"We've been having issues with pirates," the man responded irritably. "If you know of anyone who might be looking to make a hefty amount of coin and doesn't mind a bit of danger, send them our way. We're reaching the point of desperation." Teldryn mumbled something under his breath, but Neloth ignored him.

"Tragic. Back to the task at hand..."

"Yeah, yeah, just give me a minute." The imperial walked to the back of the room, dust stirring in his wake. "Do you know the name of the ship she's on?"

"I do not. And her own apprentice wasn't much help."

"Well, this might take a bit then."

Neloth let out a long sigh, pulling one of the dust-covered chairs out from beneath a nearby table and settling down.

"Is there anything I can do to assist?" Teldryn offered – ever the noble do-gooder.

The Imperial looked him up and down with a skeptical glance. "Uh, sure. There's a stack of papers on that table over there that should list all the outgoing cargo for the last week. Feel free to look it over."

The next several minutes passed in silence, occasionally interspersed with the sounds of shuffling papers and the rhythmic tap of Neloth's nails on the wooden table.

"Will you cut that out?" Teldryn finally snapped, slamming the papers in his hand down onto the table. A cloud of dust puffed up around them. "You're about to drive me up a wall. Or, would it be too taxing for you to help?"

"I don't do clerical work," Neloth explained, brushing a bit of dust from his sleeve. "Besides, I'm sure you're close to finding it."

"Ah!" The Imperial exclaimed, holding up a sheet of paper. "I think this is probably what you're looking for."

Neloth smiled smugly at Teldryn, who flung the remainder of the papers across the table before striding over to meet the Imperial halfway.

"Looks like her body was on the Sea Stallion. Unfortunately, they shipped out about a week ago." It was Teldryn's turn to smile smugly, and Neloth felt heat prickling beneath his skin. "But wait, I remember reading something..." The Imperial shoved the paper into Teldryn's hands, turning towards a slotted box than hung just over the main desk, stuffed with letters. He plucked one from its container and began to read. "Ah, yeah. That's what I thought."

"What's what you thought?" Neloth asked, annoyed by the rampant ambiguity.

"Like I said, we've been having issues with pirates, so in an attempt to counteract that, many captains have been experimenting with new routes." He stopped to scratch his head, pursing his lips. "The Sea Stallion cut a little more south than the usual path. It hit a bad storm, and well..."

He looked up, glancing between Neloith and Teldryn.

“Well, what?” Neloith pressed, crossing his arms.

“It sank.” The Imperial shrugged. “That ship and all its cargo is currently at the bottom of Pilgrim’s Trench.”

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“You can’t be serious.” Teldryn laughed in disbelief. “Deep-diving in freezing ocean waters was not part of my contract.”

“What contract?” Neloith scoffed, eyes scanning the port for anything that looked like a boat for hire. “The only agreement we made was that, for five hundred gold, you were to assist and protect me in exchange for fifty percent of any treasure we came across. Not to mention, it was a strictly verbal agreement. I didn’t sign anything.”

“Just like a Telvanni,” Teldryn spat. “Finding any way to cheat, any loopholes to shove their-”

“How is this cheating?” Neloith whirled on him. “Would you rather extend our journey by months trying to find another summoning ring? Or would you rather follow the trail we’ve been given?”

“I’d rather not die at the bottom of the ocean, is what I’d rather do.”

“Oh please.” Neloith waved his hand. “You’re Azura’s favorite child. Have a little faith.” Teldryn opened his mouth to respond, but Neloith cut him off. “Ah! There.” He set off down the docks towards a skinny, red-headed Nord tending to a small boat.

“You there,” he called out, and the Nord’s head snapped up from his work, his expression twisting with nervousness. “Are you for hire?”

“Y-yes?” the boy replied tentatively. “I can’t make it to Solstheim, though. My boat’s just meant to go between here and Dawnstar-”

“We’re not looking for passage to Solstheim. We need to be taken to Pilgrim’s Trench.”

The Nord’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “Why?”

“Will you take us, or not?”

“Um... sure. I suppose I could do that. It’ll be fifty gold up front, though. Fifty for the return trip, if you need one.”

“We’ll need a return trip,” Teldryn added over Neloith’s shoulder.

“When would you like to go?”

“As soon as possible,” Neloith pressed.

“Serjo,” Teldryn growled. “We need to stop in the city and make sure we have all the proper supplies. We’re low on food.”

“Well.” The Nord returned his attention to his boat. “I’ll need at least an hour to get her ready anyways. Meet me back here at high noon and we can be off. It shouldn’t be more than two hours to get you within reach of the trench. I can’t sail right up on it, for obvious reasons.”

“Obvious reasons?” Teldryn asked, and Neloth rolled his eyes.

“Yeah.” The Nord looked at them with confusion once again. “It’s a ship graveyard. Anyone with an ounce of respect for the gods knows not to sail near it. It’s bad luck.” He finished chipping a large section of barnacles from the boat’s hull. They plopped loudly into the water. “But I can get you close enough to walk along the shoreline.”

“Fine,” Neloth said tersely. He jerked his head towards the city gates. “Let’s go waste some time, then.”

Teldryn sighed.

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The boat ride was pleasant and easy, though the bitter cold of the wind stung worse on open water than on land. Neloth pulled his scarf up around his ears, watching the distant ice floes drift by. Teldryn curled in on himself to Neloth’s right, staring at his own feet. The sailor wasn’t much by way of conversation either, manning the rudder and looking at them as little as possible. The silence was beginning to eat away at Neloth’s sanity.

“So when did you leave Morrowind, then?” he asked, and Teldryn shifted to look at him, the buggy eyes of his helmet catching the gray reflection of the cloud-covered sky.

“The Red Year,” he said. The snow had begun to pick back up.

“You mean you were in Morrowind for the Oblivion crisis?”

“Mmm.”

“Doing what?”

“We could talk about, literally, anything else and I’d be thrilled.” Teldryn snapped. “Why you insist on sticking your fingers into my old wounds, I haven’t the faintest, but I’d appreciate it if you pulled them back out.”

“Is it a wound?” Neloth countered, his lip curling. “I wouldn’t actually know, considering you’ve told me nothing. Oblivion knows I wouldn’t have realized who you were had it not been for your own slip-up.” He crossed his legs, bouncing a foot in irritation. “I do remember you, you know.”

“I’m honored.” Sarcasm at its finest.

“You were so…” Neloth waved a hand in the air, attempting to conjure the correct word.

“Plucky.”

“Plucky!?” Teldryn sat up.

“Fearless. Optimistic. A bit foolish. It was annoying.” He exhaled. “But, you also saved a great many people, so…”

Teldryn was silent for a long moment. “Nice of you to notice.”

Neloth let out a short laugh that devolved into a silent chuckle, and the tension eased between them, if only for a moment. Teldryn pushed his goggles up onto the rim of his helmet, pulling down his scarf. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“I had a rough time, is all. After...” A sigh. “After everything.” He ran his gloved hand along his jaw, scraping across the coarse hair of his beard. “And then...” The words seemed to stick in his throat, his expression twisting, lips pressed thin. Neloth remained silent, burning with curiosity. Teldryn sat up suddenly, pulling his scarf back up and re-securing his goggles. “And then the Red Mountain erupted and I went to Windhelm like every other pathetic sod who had nowhere else to go.”

Neloth sucked at his teeth, averting his gaze to look back out across the icy waters. He had been so close. Teldryn was like a stray cat – cautious, untrusting. Perhaps with just a bit more fish and promise of warmth Neloth would finally learn why the great Nerevarine was hiding behind a mask.

The Nord steered the boat to shore, scraping through the sheets of ice until its bottom gently brushed the silty banks, gliding to a stop. Neloth plunked down into the ankle deep water, trudging towards dry land.

“I’ll return to this place at the same time tomorrow to retrieve you. Fifty gold for the return trip,” their guide reminded them. “You might want to place a marker.”

“Yes, yes, much appreciated.” Neloth waved him away impatiently, pulling his map from his satchel to consult. Teldryn helped shove the small boat backwards, watching it glide towards the main channel, before turning and wading towards where Neloth stood.

“Where to now?”

“Well, if that Imperial’s directions are to be trusted, it appears we simply follow the shoreline for about half a mile.”

“How will we know once we’ve reached Pilgrim’s Trench?”

“I suppose we’ll just have to find out once we get closer.”

The snow was still falling steadily, wind whipping at their faces as they marched along the shoreline. Horkers barked and grunted in the distance, glaciers cracking across the water, sloughing off into the sea with a splash.

“I think there’s a camp up ahead,” Teldryn pointed out, prompting Neloth to look up from his map. A snow-covered lean-to was barely visible through the flurry, as well as several barrels, an old fire pit with a rusted spit, and a half-buried trunk.

“Hopefully its resident is friendly,” Neloth grumbled, shaking snow off the map where it had begun to gather. They approached cautiously, but the camp appeared to be abandoned, possibly for quite some time – crates broken open by hungry animals, the bed roll beneath the lean-to frozen stiff. Teldryn was still poking around through the camp’s remains when Neloth made his way

towards the waterline.

“I think we’re in the correct place,” he called over his shoulder, and Teldryn was soon at his side, gazing out across the dark water with him. The broken bow of a half-sunken ship jutted out of the water like a splinter, crusted with barnacles and dried seasalt. Other bits of debris bobbed along the water’s surface, some pieces even frozen into the nearby glaciers. It truly was a ship graveyard.

“Well this is pleasant,” Teldryn commented. “And not at all ominous.”

“Can you cast waterbreathing?”

“No, I can’t. But while we were ‘wasting time’, as you called it, I stopped in Windhelm’s local apothecary and picked up a bottle of the draught.”

Neloth rolled his eyes. “Remind me to give you a trophy for your efforts.” He jerked his chin back in the direction of the camp. “Let’s secure our belongings before proceeding any further.”

They set about making the deserted camp usable – fixing the lean-to, digging out the fire pit, and inspecting the trunk. There weren’t many items of note or particular value, save some rusty weapons, old clothes, and a few spare gold pieces. Neloth dumped out its contents and secured the staves inside the trunk, casting wards along the outside for added protection. He brushed his knees off as he stood, turning to see Teldryn reading what appeared to be an old letter.

“What’s that?”

Teldryn’s response was a bit delayed, a full beat passing before his head jerked up in recognition. “What?”

He gestured at the paper. “That. What is it?”

“Oh.” Teldryn looked back down at the sheet in his hands. “A letter from the camp’s former resident, I believe.” He extended the note for Neloth to take, which he did, scanning it quickly:

*Shelly,*

*Your ship should have arrived weeks ago and I fear the worst has happened. I've set up camp on this rock as your ship should pass by here and hopefully one of these days we'll be together again. If you're reading this I'm probably out hunting or bringing in some supplies. I'll be waiting here until I see your face again.*

*Faithfully yours,*

*Trius*

“How romantic,” Neloth sneered, handing the paper back to Teldryn, who took it somberly.

“They probably died here.” He folded the letter and set it atop one of the barrels. “Waiting for their lover to return.”

“Thus is the folly of love.”

“Folly?” Teldryn huffed before mumbling, “I should have figured as much,” to himself.

“The most unstable of all emotions,” Neloth continued, beginning to take off the heavier aspects of his robes and light armor. “Wars have been waged in the name of ‘love’. Poor idiots, like our camp’s previous owner, have wasted away in the name of ‘love’, and to what end?”

“I, for one, am not about to stand in the freezing north of Skyrim and argue with you upon the merits of love.” Teldryn knelt to rummage through his pack.

“Oh, I know you’ve been a victim of it. Your melancholy is thicker than a guar’s hide, and far less useful, might I add.”

“What would you know of it?” Teldryn shot back, hackles raised, and Neloth couldn’t help but smile to himself. The mask was beginning to crack.

“Tell me, did she leave you for someone else? Or did she find your fame to be too much?”

“Don’t,” Teldryn growled in warning.

“How pathetic would it be to find out that, all this time, the great Nerevarine, savior of Morrowind, was camping out in a filthy little bar in Raven Rock because some trollop broke his heart.”

“She was murdered!” Teldryn yelled, his voice echoing off the icy cliffs to the south. “Is that what you want to hear?” He’d gotten to his feet, shoulders heaving with each ragged breath. “You want me to talk about it, yeah? That’s what you’ve wanted this whole time. You want to hear about how my *pregnant wife* was murdered? Cut down by assassins who were sent for *me* ? How a life I could have had was ripped–” His voice cracked and he coughed, looking away, fists clenched at his sides.

Neloth pursed his lips, eyes narrowing. “And over two-hundred years later you’re still wallowing in self-pity?” He scoffed. “Like I said. Pathetic.”

Teldryn moved so quickly that Neloth barely had time to register what had happened until the ground was rushing up to meet him, the hard, chitin of Teldryn’s bracer imprinted across his jaw.

“And what do you know of loss!?” Teldryn was standing over him, fists still clenched. Neloth attempted to sit up when another burst of pain exploded across his temple as Teldryn punched him again, harder this time, grabbing and twisting Neloth’s scarf in the other hand. “What do you know of suffering!?”

Neloth’s mouth flooded with iron, and he spit onto the ground, a shock of red across the white snow. He smiled cruelly up at Teldryn. “I know that it’s a weakness that can be exploited.” He spat again. “Just as I’m doing now.” He expected it this time, dodging the next blow and using the momentum to pull Teldryn to the ground as he scrambled to get up, already gathering magicka into his palms. He let out a grunt as one of Teldryn’s knees collided with his stomach and sent him sprawling once again; his spell charges faltered and dropped away. Another fist to his face, this time the other side. Teldryn rolled to straddle him, scarf dislodged and hanging loosely around his neck. He balled the front of Neloth’s robes into his fists.

Teldryn shook as he spoke. “You don’t feel anything, do you!?” His voice had a hysterical edge, and Neloth thought, distantly, that perhaps he’d pushed too far. “I doubt you’ve ever loved anyone as much as you love yourself, and, from what I can tell, you *hate* yourself!” Teldryn dropped him, pushing to stand and Neloth groaned, rubbing his tender jaw as Teldryn continued. “You can’t



experience anything other than selfish need, and you want everyone to be as miserable as you.” He spat on the ground near Neloeth’s head before turning away, stooping to grab his pack.

“What are you doing?” Neloeth cast healing on himself.

“I’m fucking leaving,” Teldryn snapped. “I’ll walk back to Windhelm if I bloody have to. Get on a boat. Row back to Solstheim. Leave you here to rot like I should have to begin with.”

A dozen responses threatened to spill out of Neloeth’s mouth, venomous; poised like a snake on the tip of his tongue. They all shriveled away, curling back inside him as Teldryn’s figure slowly began to fade amidst the flurry of snow. An odd sensation twisted in his gut – something sour, acrid. Neloeth didn’t feel regret. Or, at least, he experienced the sensation so rarely that he wasn’t sure if what he felt *was* regret. He pushed to a kneeling position, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. A smear of blood glistened across his knuckles. He cast another basic healing spell, breathing deeply as pleasant, tingling waves of energy pulsed through his body, the split in his lip sealing shut, the ache along his cheekbone fading. He got to his feet, wiping his palms on the front of his robes. The letter caught his eye where Teldryn had set it atop one of the old barrels, folded reverently. Neloeth picked it up and read it over again, upper lip curling with distaste. He hated the author, probably frozen to death somewhere in the mountains – perhaps eaten by wolves, mauled by a frost troll. He hated the author’s lover, most likely nothing more than a cold, dead corpse at the bottom of the sea. He hated Teldryn with his self-righteous indignation, his bleeding heart, his pathetic attachment to the past. He hated that this stupid little letter was the straw that broke the strider’s back. He hated so fiercely. But above all else, Neloeth hated himself. He hated himself and he hated the fact that he was beginning to realize what that rancid twist in his stomach really was: loneliness.

Flames erupted from the palm of his hand and consumed the letter, its ashen remnants drifting through the air alongside the soft, downy snowflakes. With renewed vigor, Neloeth shed the remainder of his outer robes and tucked them beneath the lean-to, striding back towards the shoreline. He stepped out of his boots, cursing the cold as jagged rocks stabbed into the soles of his feet. He exhaled sharply, casting a quick flare spell to warm himself. With one final look to the sky, reminding himself that this would all be worth it in the end, he stepped forward into the water.

He held back another string of curses, biting the inside of his cheek and growling lowly as the water cut at him like hundreds of knives, pain spiking through his legs. Still he continued to move forward. There was a steep drop-off as he waded further out, the water turning pitch black as the seabed opened up into a yawning chasm. Neloeth peered down into the inky blackness and began to cast water breathing, ending with a quick pop of candlelight as a way to keep time: when the light went out, he’d have to resurface. With clenched fists and a tightened jaw, he stepped off the ledge, the water rushing up to consume him.

The first breath was always the strangest. The cold hit Neloeth’s lungs like a punch, and he bared his teeth, willing liquid to become gas, the currents of his alteration spell bending reality around him until he felt nothing but air in his lungs. Without further hesitation, he dove forward, swimming downwards.

For a long moment, all he could see was darkness. Then, the shimmering light of his spell began to

catch the edges of shapes, vague and distant, looming. Dozens of ships, scattered like the splintered bones of giants across the ocean floor. Determining which one was the Sea Stallion would take longer than his initial spell would last. He glided along, scanning the wreckage for any ship that looked newer, the least scabrous and barnacle-encrusted. The ghostly white expanse of a tattered sail undulated lethargically as he passed. Silence and pressure surrounded him, pressing in on all sides as he slowly moved through this harsh, alien landscape. His candlelight blinked out and he quickly kicked to the surface, feeling the laws of nature sliding back into place around him. He breached the water with a gasp, the cold air biting at his ears and nose. He looked back to land, surprised to see just how far he'd swam. A pathetic part of him hoped he'd see Teldryn standing on the shore, hands on his hips, looking put-out but too heroic to stay away.

The shoreline was empty.

Neloth quickly recast water breathing and candlelight before diving back down beneath the surface. After another pass through the wreckage, he finally found a cracked hull with Sea Stallion scrawled in a faded, looping script across the boards. His candlelight blinked out and he surfaced to recast his spells before eagerly diving back down. He'd grown numb to the cold, using a bit of magicka to raise his core temperature just enough to prevent freezing, but his joints had grown stiff, his movements choppy. Instead of swimming, he felt as if he were fighting with the water. He pulled himself into the Sea Stallion's hull through a large gash in its side – most likely the reason for its early demise. The cargo had all slid down against the far wall, piling into a chaotic heap. One particularly long crate caught Neloth's attention and he paddled over.

Flecks of debris drifted listlessly through the beams of his magelight, and time almost felt frozen as he approached the box. He ran a hand across its surface, scraping away some of the slime and algae. It was most certainly a coffin. He slid his fingers between the seam of the lid, giving an experimental tug. The rotted wood gave way immediately with a muted crack, and in the cold light of his spell the bloated, decaying body of Master Ellane began to float rapidly upwards. Neloth grabbed her by the front of her robes, trying to push her down, back into the coffin, and his candlelight blipped out plunging him into complete darkness.

Shit.

He had less than fifteen seconds before his water breathing spell would end. He couldn't let the body go, or else he might lose it. Thinking quickly, Neloth felt along the line of the corpses arms, shuddering as he found her stiff, cold hands, crossed over her chest. He smiled in triumph as he felt a small metal band on one of her fingers, yanking it so forcefully that the finger was torn clean off in the process. Sliding the ring onto his pinky, Neloth turned and kicked as hard as he could, using the scarce amount of light streaming through the side of the hull as his guide. He pulled himself back through and felt reality shifting back into place around him; air becoming water once again. He inhaled deeply one last time then exhaled forcefully, holding his breath. The surface seemed impossibly far away, darkness immense and all-consuming around him. His movements had become jerky, ineffective, and he let out a strangled grunt as he clawed at the water. The cold was back. Paralyzing. Neloth couldn't hold his breath any longer, and he silently screamed at himself to keep fighting, that the surface was right there.

He sucked in a breath and his body convulsed painfully as water flooded his lungs, desperation doubling down as pure instinct took over. He couldn't focus. He wasn't even sure if he was swimming towards the surface anymore, or just thrashing wildly in the water. He was suffocating.

*No. Not like this.*

*Of all the ways to die, not like this...*

His vision tunneled, his movements slowing until he simply stopped moving altogether. He saw a light, brilliant, pulsing, growing larger. Aetherius, he thought distantly. Magnus. He closed his eyes and his thoughts stopped.

Cold.

Pressure.

Light.

Pain.

Neloth's eyes snapped open and he rolled onto his side, vomiting seawater. Salt stung his eyes and gushed through his nose as he heaved.

"Reckless..."

Neloth's gurgling turned into a panicked sob as he expelled even more water. His body shook uncontrollably, cheek aching where it pressed into the jagged, black rocks of the shoreline.

"Idiot..."

Finally he was done, and he rolled onto his back, his chest heaving as he sucked in breath after breath. The cold air scraped the inside of his raw throat with tiny claws. He stared at the thick layer of clouds in the sky above him as his breathing began to slow. They were moving steadily to the left, giving Neloth the dizzying sensation of gliding across the ground. Every now and then pockets of blue would emerge, only to be swallowed up by more swaths of gray. Pressure on his stomach. He looked down.

Teldryn knelt beside him, one hand still resting just below Neloth's sternum. His hair was plastered to the side of his face, water dripping down his jaw, small droplets clinging to his beard. His mouth was moving, but Neloth couldn't quite make out the words over the rumbling in his ears with every convulsing shake of his body.

“...you gone mad?” Teldryn pushed his hair out of his face, slicking it down over the crest of his head. He looked furious, and a bit like a wet hen, and Neloath couldn’t help but laugh weakly.

“Are you laughing!?” Teldryn’s voice was hoarse and it cracked on the final syllable.

“Thank you,” Neloath breathed, raising a trembling hand to pat Teldryn’s arm. Teldryn didn’t move, and so Neloath thought he may not have heard him. He said it again.

“Thank you, Teldryn.”

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The bed roll did nothing to warm him as Neloath sat huddled beneath the scrappy lean-to, shivering violently while he watched Teldryn break apart every crate in the camp to feed the pitfire. Teldryn grumbled to himself the entire time. The old, rotted wood was damp from snow and sea air, and Teldryn directed a particularly furious blast of fire at the pit in an attempt to get it to catch. Neloath just looked on, teeth chattering. He closed his eyes and focused his small reserve of magicka, pushing his core heat outwards. Tendrils of steam began to curl off his arms and legs, and he let out a tremendous sigh. At last, the fire stayed lit, and Teldryn plunked down next to Neloath. He rested his forearms against his knees, staring straight ahead, and lapsed into a pointed, bitter silence. The fire hissed like an angry snake, water bubbling along the wood’s surface.

“I do...” Neloath began, and Teldryn jumped, ever so slightly. Neloath’s voice was so ragged that he felt a little startled himself, barely recognizing the sound. He cleared his throat. “I do... feel.” He twisted the stiff bedroll between his fingers. “I do.”

Teldryn said nothing, continuing to look straight ahead.

“It’s just...” He didn’t know where he was going with this, but the words were clawing their way out of him, like some kind of sick, emaciated animal emerging from a cave. “I don’t think I... feel... *correctly*.” He exhaled sharply, letting his head roll from side to side, neck popping. “I’ve always been this way. It’s not just the result of graying morals from a prolonged life. I’ve always had this,” he gestured to his chest with trembling fingers, “*hole*. Like something’s missing.” He pulled the bedroll tighter around him, curling in on himself. A small laugh. “It’s been useful, if I’m honest.”

Teldryn shifted to look at him, still silent. His eyes were sunken and tired, but far too imploring for Neloath’s liking. He quickly evaded that gaze, focusing on the ground instead.

“Is this an apology?”

Neloath’s immediate instinct was to bite back, to lash out, tear him down. To wring the condescension from his voice. But Neloath breathed, and bit his tongue.

“Perhaps,” was all he said. Teldryn quirked a brow and Neloath made sure to make a show of rolling his eyes. “Alright, yes, fine. I’m *sorry*.”

“So, it took you nearly dying—”

“Don’t. Just...” Neloath let out a low growl. “Don’t make this any harder than it already is.”

“I’m sorry that apologizing is so difficult for you.”

“Not that, you impertinent little—” Neloth took a breath, rubbing the heels of his palms against his eyes before covering his ears. “For whatever reason, you wanted to keep me alive.” He sighed again. “I appreciate it. And, for what it’s worth, I... I dislike your company less than most people.”

Teldryn placed a hand over his heart. “Neloth, I’m touched.”

“Oh, do shove it.” A violent shiver wracked Neloth’s body and Teldryn rolled to his feet, walking over towards the fire and retrieving his scarf. It was pleasantly warm as he draped it around Neloth’s neck, looping it sloppily around his head with a flourish. Neloth mumbled an indignant ‘thank you’, looking anywhere but at the mer in front of him. He felt weak and pathetic – this entire situation could be used against him in the future. A small voice in the back of his mind told him Teldryn wouldn’t do that. He wasn’t a Telvanni. Teldryn was a hero.

“Is that it?” Teldryn asked, motioning to Neloth’s hand.

Neloth extended his arm, straightening his fingers and inspecting the ring. “I certainly hope so.” A shimmer of enchantment caught the light and he smiled. “It would be terribly inconvenient to have to go through all that again because I stole her wedding band by accident.”

“But you would, wouldn’t you?” Teldryn asked with a chuckle. “Go through it all again. Because you’re absolutely out of your mind.”

“I like to think I’m simply driven.” Neloth grinned behind the scarf, and the two of them laughed, despite everything. It was an odd feeling – a great wash of calm, as if the broken pieces of a lock has finally slid back into place – and Neloth suddenly felt incredibly tired. Teldryn cooked a bit of their food and they ate in relative silence before Neloth finally lowered himself onto his side with a groan, body aching. Teldryn padded the lean-to with the random clothes they’d found in the trunk before crawling in beside him, close enough for Neloth to feel the heat rolling off of his body. He watched from beneath heavy, half-closed lids as Teldryn settled down, pulling the bedroll up over his ears, and Neloth’s final waking thoughts were still wondering why Teldryn got all those tattoos.

He woke at some point during the night. The snow had stopped and the cloud cover had dispersed, the borealis dominating the sky. Teldryn slept quietly beside him, his sides rising and falling steadily beneath the bed roll. Silently, Neloth pulled himself from beneath the furs, climbing over Teldryn, taking care not to disturb him. He cast a quick flare spell, warmth tingling through his extremities as he padded barefoot out across the soft, snow-covered ground. The landscape was awash with green and blue, shimmering like the slick iridescence of a blackbird’s wing, the only sounds the soft lapping of water against the shore. Above him the moons gazed down at Mundus mutely, so close, and yet infinitely far. Neloth inspected the ring on his finger. A simple silver band alight with enchantment – so small, so innocuous. With the staves intact, would he be able to travel to the moons? Could he open doorways into Aetherius, step through the tears in the sky? Would he see Nirn with the eyes of a god?

“Neloth.”

He spun around to see Teldryn propped up on one elbow, blinking at him with sleep-sunken eyes. His hair stuck up at an odd angle.

“S’cold. Get back here.”

Neloth stepped dutifully back towards the lean-to, ducking down to step over Teldryn and slide back into his bedroll. Teldryn mumbled something, pulling the covers up over his ears once again, and Neloth shuffled until his back was pressed firmly up against Teldryn’s, feeling the heat from his body even through the thick layers of furs and skins. Oddly comforting. He situated the scarf around his ears, staring sightlessly at the small cracks in the back of the lean-to until his mind stilled and he closed his eyes.

## Chapter End Notes

Another installment of "Topsy fridges Teldryn's unnamed wife."

No, but seriously, this is one of my favorite chapters in the entire story. I had such a blast writing it. Between Neloth finally getting the punch in the face he deserved, to forcing him to feel things, to my favorite past-time: torturing Teldryn... *\*chefs kiss\**

Also, the lore book after which this story was titled, [Breathing Water](#), was a huge inspiration for this chapter. I also tried to implement the game mechanics (specifically for Skyrim) that doesn't allow for spellcasting under water.

Thanks to everyone who's shown me some love so far! Y'all are amazing.

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Notes

Thank you so much [FourCatProductions](#) for the beta work on this chapter!! You're a gentleman and a scholar.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It took them four days to get back to Winterhold; the carriage was delayed due to a particularly nasty storm that had blown in from the Pale. Teldryn took up a few small jobs in Windhelm to help pass the time, as well as pad his coin purse. Neloth was indignant at first, but a warm meal and an even warmer night's sleep seemed to soothe the old mer, even if it did mean sharing a bed once again. He spent the few extra days hunched over his journal, staring intently at his newly acquired ring and studying every square inch of the two staves. Teldryn still hated Windhelm, but lending a hand to the citizens of the Grey Quarter helped to ease his mind, give him a bit of purpose, even if it was mostly running errands and helping to settle disputes. Neloth grumbled each night about his bleeding heart and fatal heroism, but Teldryn shrugged him off, making non-committal noises as they shuffled about in preparation for sleep.

Neloth had been noticeably more agreeable since the... *incident* . They hadn't spoken about it, but the changes in his demeanor were like night and day. Their interactions were friendlier; though they still bickered, it was less hostile. Teldryn felt physically lighter from it. He couldn't help but steal curious glances whenever Neloth wasn't paying attention, just to see the softness around his eyes. Of course, as soon as he was noticed, Neloth would scrunch up his face.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Teldryn watched him even now, as Neloth tugged and fought with the ratty covers of the bed, squashing and fluffing the pillow and generally acting like an ornery old bird in his nest. Yet Teldryn didn't complain when he inevitably woke to feel the warm press of Neloth's back up against his own. It was more comforting than he'd ever admit.

On Turdas they were able to depart for Windhelm. The carriage ride was tense, with Teldryn constantly looking over their shoulders for any signs of the Thalmor. He insisted that Neloth pull his scarf up over his head, hide his face a bit more. Neloth had simply given him a flat look, snapped his fingers, and suddenly appeared to be a young Bosmer girl. Teldryn sulked in silence after that, continuing to glance nervously out the back of the cart.

Savos greeted them warmly upon their return, ushering them up into his quarters for tea. Teldryn let out a weary sigh as they ascended the final set of stairs, removing his helmet and rolling his shoulders to loosen them.

"I trust that your travels were fruitful?" Savos inquired, conjuring an arcane flame beneath a

blackened clay teapot.

“Quite.” Neloth sat down, opening his journal. “Though I will need continued access to the Arcanaeum.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.” Savos checked the water, then sat across from Neloth at the table. Teldryn took a moment to stroll over to the Arch-Mage’s alchemical garden, studying it with fascination.

“I...” Savos cleared his throat. “If it’s not imposing too much, Master Neloth. Would you possibly consider stepping in as a guest lecturer during your stay here?”

Neloth chuckled, still flipping through his journal. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Oh, but why not? The students could learn so much from you! We don’t have anyone on staff who’s even come close to studying magic as long as you have.”

“It would be a waste of time,” Neloth insisted, closing his journal with a snap. “I’ve sat in on some of these so-called classes. More like childcare. Your professors hold students' hands as if they were unstable little toddlers. A lesson from me might very well kill them.”

“Come now, Neloth,” Teldryn chuckled, righting himself from inspecting a cluster of Namira’s rot. “I’d have figured you’d jump at the opportunity to spread the Telvanni legacy.”

“House Telvanni’s study of the arcane arts is not something to be spread like netch jelly on toast,” he argued.

“I can pay you,” Savos tried, prompting Neloth to let out an even louder bark of laughter.

“Desperation, Savos, is quite unbecoming of you.” Neloth looked down at his journal, drumming his fingertips against the cover, then looked over to Teldryn again, a silent question behind his eyes. Teldryn simply raised his brows and shrugged as an answer. Neloth sighed, throwing his head back melodramatically. “Fine. One lesson.”

“Excellent! This will be momentous.” Savos tapped his knuckles against the table excitedly as he rose to his feet, checking the tea. “I do hope you don’t mind if the faculty sits in to watch.”

“Not at all.” Neloth grinned. “Perhaps they might learn something.”

“Arch-Mage.”

Teldryn and Neloth’s attention snapped in the direction of the voice. Ancano stood in the center of the archway, looking between the three of them. Teldryn turned quickly to face away, none-too-subtly shielding his face.

“Ancano.” Savos nodded in recognition. “What is it you need?”

“I simply need your permission to speak with some of the students, one-on-one.”

“Whatever for?”

“Simply for record-keeping purposes.”



“Record keeping? Explain.”

Teldryn hear Ancano sigh. “Think of it as keeping track of the student’s current experiences, as well as their opinions on the college, faculty, and the progression of their studies.”

“I would really prefer to be there for such an interview,” Savos argued.

“I believe the students would feel more comfortable without their Arch-Mage present. It would allow them to speak their minds. Without feeling judged or uncomfortable.”

“The Thalmor’s presence at the college already makes a great deal of them feel uncomfortable. We’re a school, Ancano, not a political faction. Many of the students have just left home for the first time in their lives. I have to insist that I be present.”

Ancano was silent for a moment. “As you wish, Arch-Mage.”

Teldryn turned around to see Ancano staring directly at him, eyes narrowed. Neloth seemed to be doing an excellent job ignoring the Altmer completely, flipping idly through one of the books that had been sitting on Savos’s dining table.

“Is there anything else?” Savos pressed after an uncomfortable amount of time had passed in silence, during which Ancano and Teldryn continued to lock eyes.

“No, Arch-Mage, I believe that’s all.” Ancano spun on his heel and exited the room, hands clasped tightly behind his back. As his footsteps faded, Neloth let out a long sigh.

“Annoying little insect, isn’t he?”

“Master Neloth, please,” Savos scolded, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “The students are hostile enough towards him.”

Neloth let out a huff. “Well, he doesn’t exactly do the best job of being warm and approachable.”

“As if you do a better job,” Teldryn couldn’t help but jab with a smirk.

Neloth smiled thinly, closing the book he’d been reading. “At least I’m honest about my displeasure for others,” he said, getting to his feet.

“The tea is almost done.”

“Yes, perhaps I’ll take mine to go.”

“Urag won’t let you near his books with a cup of tea.”

“Oh please.” Neloth waved the comment away. “As if I’m some clumsy child. It’ll be fine.” He turned to Teldryn. “Join me?”

“Lead the way.”

Teldryn followed Neloth down the stairs into the Arcanaeum, entering through Savos’s private chamber, a hot tea bowl clutched between his palms. Urag greeted them with a grunt, eyeing their tea warily, but held his tongue.

“Sigil stones, summoning circles, the like?” Neloth asked. Urag just shook his head, peering

around them to scan the library.

“We had four students killed not too long ago while trying to summon something they shouldn’t have. If you want to look into such a thing, you’ll have to go somewhere else for that, friend,” he said, jerking his chin over his shoulder in the direction of his quarters. Neloth rolled his eyes, motioning for Teldryn to follow him. He pushed through the door and stepped lightly down the passageway, pausing on the middle landing to take a prim sip of tea.

“The damn secrecy of this place drives me mad.”

“Yes, well,” Teldryn took a sip of his own tea to prevent it from sloshing, “there is a bit of a civil war going on. And Nords are unfriendly to magic regardless.” Neloth just grunted in response, moving down the stairs to the false bookcase, tugging on *The Firmament* .

Once down below, the two of them began scanning the collections, candlelight bobbing over each of their shoulders.

“I wish that blasted orc would come down here and help,” Neloth complained, pulling out dusty tome after dusty tome, only to reshelve it with a frustrated growl.

“He’s trying not to draw attention to us,” Teldryn offered. “And also, did you see the way Ancano was looking at me in the Arch-Mage’s quarters?” He blew dust off a book’s cover only to be disappointed with the title, and placed it back where he found it.

“I’m afraid I didn’t. Did he look... *interested* ?”

“What!? No! Not like...” Teldryn huffed. “He looked suspicious. I’m positive now that he’s the one who sent those agents. I doubt he’s done trying to stick his pointy nose into our business either.”

“Yes, well, I think ignoring him would probably be the best course of action. Ah!” Neloth let out a please little laugh. “Got you, you slippery little—”

“Ignoring him?” Teldryn wandered in the direction of Neloth’s arcane light. “Are you sure that’s the best idea?”

“Hmm?” Neloth already had his nose buried in some massive tome. “Yes, yes. If you don’t give a child any attention, they lose interest and toddle off. Besides, he didn’t mention anything about the agents who interrupted us at the Inn.”

“Which is equally troubling,” Teldryn grumbled.

“Oh, will you stop worrying and take this over to the table?” He hefted the large book into Teldryn’s arms. “I want to see if I can find anything else before I settle in.”

Teldryn couldn’t read half the languages the books were written in. He skimmed through the ones he could, trying to absorb as much as possible. Neloth tore through the tomes in front of him, jotting things down with one hand as the other flipped rapidly through pages, tracing sentences, holding markers.

“I don’t know how useful I am right now,” Teldryn confessed, closing his book with a sigh.

“Hmm?” Neloth looked up. “Well, I believe I have a handle on things. You can go if you’d like.”

“Would you like some more tea?”

“Ah,” Neloth had turned his attention back to the book. “Yes, that would be much appreciated.” He handed Teldryn his tea bowl without looking.

Teldryn was halfway up the steps before he realized that he’d just had one of the most civil exchanges with Neloth that he’d ever experienced.

He was still shaking his head and chuckling to himself as he made his way towards the Arch-Mage’s quarters, when Ancano materialized out of the shadows. Teldryn stopped dead in his tracks, shoulders squaring.

“You,” Ancano began, his lip already curling as he looked Teldryn up and down with distaste. “Where’s your master? I need to speak with him.”

“Busy. And I’m his hired sword. He’s not my master.”

“Of course.” Ancano sneered. “Is fetching tea within a sellsword’s contract these days?”

Teldryn lowered his arms, gripping the tea bowl in one hand. “Perhaps it’s something I could help you with?”

“No, I think not.” He looked over Teldryn’s shoulder, eyes narrowing, as if Neloth might be hiding back behind the books.

“You’re not very subtle, you know,” Teldryn said, immediately wishing he’d held his tongue.

Ancano turned his gaze back down to him, icy cold. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’re utterly transparent.”

“Is that so?” Ancano’s smile was vicious. He crossed his arms in front of his chest, cocking his head to the side. “I’m merely here to keep the order. To report and observe. I’m here to keep the students *safe*. Tell me, Dunmer, do you know how many students have died at this college in the past ten years alone?” Teldryn’s grip on the tea bowl tightened even more. Ancano continued without giving him time to answer. “Over twenty-five. *Twenty-five* students have perished under this exact administration. Something that would never be stood for in Summerset. This college is a *hazard*. And I may not know much of Morrowind or your little customs, but I know enough about the Telvannis to know that they have a reputation for causing trouble.”

“We’re not here to cause trouble for the College—”

“Well that’s the thing, isn’t it,” Ancano interrupted. “Why *are* you here?”

Teldryn scowled at him. “Research.”

“Indeed. Well.” He turned on his heel. “Do send your... *patron* my way when he gets the chance. I’d very much like to speak with him.”

Teldryn watched Ancano leave with a tight jaw, chewing nervously on his tongue. He stomped up the stairs to the Arch-Mage's quarters with a growing sickness in his stomach.

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"Destruction," Neloth began, "is the most basic, most fundamental school of magic that exists." He paced before the gaggle of students, wrists clasped behind his back. Teldryn leaned against the far wall, content to be an onlooker. He was accompanied by several professors that had decided to sit in on Neloth's lesson.

"Some," Neloth continued, "have argued that it is not a 'true' school of magic, and that its spells are better fit to be categorized under the school of Alteration." He smiled unkindly. "Not only does that completely discredit the realm of possibilities for the school of Destruction, but it also shows a profound ignorance in understanding the basics of Alteration as well. Nevertheless..." He raised a hand, conjuring a palm-sized flame. Teldryn could see it reflected in the eyes of the students as they looked on with no small amount of fear. "There are three main categories of Destruction spells: elemental damage," he produced a small, swirling snowstorm in the other palm, before quickly banishing both spells with a flourish and a pop, "draining damage," a ball of furious red energy emerged in his left hand, "and vulnerability damage." Pulsing green energy flared to life in his right hand, writhing like snakes. He dismissed those spells as well.

"Now, if you're clever, you may already be drawing parallels between these spells and several other schools of magic, but do not be mistaken: the laws of Destruction are very much their own. As for today, since you're all fairly new to the college, we will be covering the basics of elemental Destruction, for what can be more intrinsic than the very elements of nature itself? Let's begin with fire."

"Master Neloth," one boy spoke up. He looked to be an Imperial; young, handsome. He kept his hand raised as he spoke, chin held high. "Wouldn't you consider it a bit unfair to begin with fire, given that Dunmer have a natural proclivity towards—" He let out a startled yelp as a small bolt of electricity struck the ground by his feet, directed from Neloth's pointer finger.

"No speaking out of turn," he clipped. "Now, who here feels like they have a fairly good understanding of the element of fire?" Unsurprisingly, all the Dunmer students raised their hands, as well as a Khajiit, and a Nord.

"Confident little group, aren't we? You." He pointed at the Khajiit. "Step forward." The Khajiit did with no small amount of swagger, tail swishing with anticipation, a half-cocked smile on his lips.

"J'zargo thinks you may be giving us too little credit."

"That remains to be seen," Neloth replied. "Now, stand opposite me. Twenty paces. A bit further — there." Neloth widened his stance. "I want you to cast the most powerful fire spell you know."

J'zargo's tail went still, his whiskers flexing forward. One of the students gasped a bit too loudly before covering their mouth. J'zargo tilted his head to the side, still smiling. "This one does not wish to kill you."

Neloth let out a barking laugh. "I'm quite sure you won't. Cast the spell." Teldryn chewed the inside of his cheeks nervously, the other professors leaning forward in anticipation. From the

entryway, Teldryn saw Ancano slip into the room, immediately relegating himself to the shadows.

J'zargo lowered his gaze, curling in on himself as magical energy gathered around his arms, focalizing between his palms. He pulled back, as if winding up for a throw, then pushed the spell forward with a tremendous amount of force. The room erupted with heat and light as a massive, spinning tornado of flame ripped across the hall. Shifting a foot behind him, Neloth brought one hand up; a massive, glistening ward sprung to life between himself and the oncoming firestorm, curving up and around his head. The flames rolled off the ward like water off a duck's back and dissipated into the air, leaving the room feeling even colder than it had been before.

"Not bad, actually," Neloth offered. "You lack finesse, as well as control, but the raw energy is there. You certainly understand the element, at least in a basic sense." He pulled a small flame into his palm. "Now, I shall show you what I mean by 'control'." With a flick of his wrist, Neloth hurled the small flame at J'zargo. The Khajiit's eyes went wide and he immediately threw up a ward as the small flame rapidly increased in size, roaring into a massive fireball. Before it even touched J'zargo's ward, however, Neloth stepped backwards, pulling the magicka with him as if he were heaving the riggings of a ship. All at once, the flames extinguished, the massive blast of heat managing to knock J'zargo's hood backwards off his head. He dropped his ward, staring at Neloth with large eyes and flattened ears.

"Fire is the most unpredictable of all the elements," Neloth continued, as if he hadn't almost completely torched a student. "The best way to hone your skills with destruction is by practicing a pull-back – simply retracting the currents of your magicka back into yourself. This small technique will translate into all other schools of magic. I chose fire to start because it is the most difficult to control. Dunmer may have an ancestral connection to flame, yes, but the arcane fire is alive within all who practice the arts. Your magicka is an extension of yourself, like another arm. Once you realize that you and the fire you wield are not at all separate, your connection to magicka can only become more powerful. Then, going forward, it matters not whether the spell's casting be range, touch, or trap triggered, for your understanding will be rooted in reciprocity – a working relationship with your connection to the gifts of Magnus. Now, pair off into groups of two and practice. Do not attempt to use a spell more powerful than firebolt or you will be pulled out of the exercise."

Neloth paced around the room for the next twenty minutes, directing and correcting the students as needed. Finally, as he stood back to watch, Teldryn stepped to his side.

"You're an excellent teacher."

Neloth looked at him out of the corner of his eye. "Of course I am."

"What I mean," Teldryn laughed, "is that you've a real knack for it, considering you're a belligerent, self-centered old s'wit." Neloth didn't so much smile as bare his teeth, and Teldryn laughed again before softening his tone. "A place like this would be lucky to have you."

"One incompetent apprentice is enough, thank you," Neloth sniffed. "I don't need an entire school of unruly children. My only hope is that Talvas hasn't burned Tel Mithryn to the ground before we get back to Solstheim."

"Master Neloth." Ancano had approached them without Teldryn noticing, and he immediately stiffened his posture, narrowing his eyes. Ancano ignored him. "A word with you, when you get

the chance?”

“After class.” Neloth dismissed him with a wave, striding back towards the students. Ancano continued to stare in the spot where Neloth had been standing, the muscle beneath his left eye spasming slightly. He turned on his heel and strode out of the hall.

“Alright, that’s enough!” Neloth’s voice echoed off the high chambers. The sudden retraction of magicka by a dozen or so students left Teldryn’s ears ringing. “We will resume for a final lesson tomorrow. In the meantime, please read both “Bero’s Speech to Battlemages” as well as “Response to Bero’s Speech” by Malviser, and write a short essay on why they are both spectacularly wrong. Class dismissed.”

The students were abuzz with chatter as they all exited the hall, several of the professors rushing over to Neloth as soon as the room had cleared. Teldryn stood back, leaning against the wall with something akin to pride swelling in his chest. Though the change in Neloth’s demeanor wasn’t at all drastic, he was still a bit slower to bite, a bit more patient. More pleasant to be around. He caught Teldryn’s eye from amidst the circle of teachers and made a show of rolling his own, and Teldryn chuckled to himself.

A shadow appeared to his right.

“Quite the dangerous display earlier,” Ancano said.

Teldryn wanted to ignore him, but couldn’t. “It was all very much under control.” He glanced at the mer. “That was the entire point of the lesson, if you were paying attention.”

Ancano laughed – a forced, tittering sound. “Quite.” He looked at Teldryn with that same appraising sweep from earlier. “You know, I’ve been starting to wonder.” He inspected his nail beds with an air of boredom. “Why someone as powerful as Master Neloth would need to hire a lowly sellsword for protection. Or why our very own Arch-Mage would choose to follow said spellsword around like an obedient dog.” Ancano smiled. “It’s very interesting, wouldn’t you agree?”

Teldryn wished he was wearing his helmet. His full armor, even. “I’m the best swordsman in all of Morrowind,” he replied flatly. “Even powerful mages are not invulnerable.”

Something sinister lit up behind Ancano’s eyes and Teldryn wished he’d said nothing at all. “You’re quite correct.”

“You there.” Neloth was striding towards them. “Stop bothering my employee and tell me what you wanted to speak to me about.”

Ancano straightened up. “Of course. Join me for a walk?”

Teldryn watched them leave the main hall with a lump of dread in his stomach. He didn’t like leaving Neloth alone with that Altmer. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust that Neloth couldn’t protect himself, just more so that the old mer was willfully oblivious to the current political subtleties at

play. They couldn't afford any more attention than they'd already drawn to themselves. Another teacher was approaching him and Teldryn reluctantly turned his thoughts away from whatever Ancano might be plotting.

"What an exciting class that was." It was the old Nord they'd met on their first day arriving here. Tolfdir was his name, Teldryn had learned. "Though a bit too dangerous for my tastes."

"His methods are unconventional, but effective." Teldryn offered a smile. "I assure you, none of the students were in any real danger."

"Oh, my dear boy, I've seen much worse in my days here." Tolfdir laughed, and Teldryn didn't correct the Nord's assumption of his age.

"No doubt."

"How long will you and Master Neloth be staying with us at the college? And will you also be offering a class? Savos told me that you're quite powerful in your own right."

Teldryn's eyebrows shot up. "Did he? What did he say?"

"Oh," Tolfdir scratched his beard. "Just that you're well-known in Morrowind."

"Well, I don't know if that's the case anymore." Teldryn chuckled nervously. "No, I won't be teaching any classes. And as for how long we'll be staying, it's honestly whenever Neloth decides he's acquired all the information he needs."

"Do you know what he's researching?"

"No idea," Teldryn lied with a laugh.

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"He's a nosey little weasel," Neloth spat. "Rooting through people's business like a guar nosing for ash yams."

"What did he want?"

They'd convened back in Teldryn's room in the Hall of Countenance an hour after sundown. Neloth had made himself right at home, spreading his scrolls and notebooks out across the small table, a wooden plate with a half-nibbled slice of bread and cheese perched atop a stack of books. Teldryn reclined on the bed, boots off and a bottle of ale in one hand, doing his best to relax.

"Oh, it's hard to say." Neloth took another bite of bread, dusting his fingers off before turning the page of the current book he had open. "Mostly just babbled about the safety of the students, the college's history of malpractice, et cetera, et cetera. I asked him if he sent the agents after us."

Teldryn had been mid-sip and nearly choked. He sat up in a coughing fit, pounding a fist against his chest. "You just outright asked him?" he croaked. "Neloth, we very well may have a significant bounty on our heads because of that little incident."

"Yes, well, he played dumb," Neloth sneered. "Though he did say the ever-tiring line of 'if you're guiltless then you have nothing to worry about'." He scoffed. "As if centuries of manipulating

evidence and circumstance hasn't been used against guilty and guiltless alike."

"You shouldn't have mentioned the agents."

"Oh please. Now he at least knows we're onto his little tricks."

Teldryn settled back against the bed with a sigh, taking a long pull from his ale to try to ease the ever-growing knot of tension in his gut. He licked his lips, resting the bottle against his thigh.

"Savos apparently told the other professors that I'm... someone of note."

Neloth looked up, quirking a brow. "Really? I knew he was excitable, but I didn't take him to be an utter fool."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't get defensive, dear Nerevarine. I just meant that I'd have thought him to know better than to draw attention to..." He made a vague hand motion in Teldryn's direction before turning back to his books.

"You just gestured to all of me."

"Indeed. Nevertheless," Neloth continued, "I doubt it'll be a problem. If anything you can tell people you're a Redoran Councilor or something of the sort. I doubt any of these Nords know a thing about Dunmeri politics. They'll just take it at face value."

"I hope you're right." Teldryn took another swig of ale. "Not that my actual title means much of anything anymore."

"Your constant self-depreciation is exhausting."

Teldryn smiled thinly, swinging his feet off the bed. "It's getting late."

"Mhmm."

Teldryn paused, staring at Neloth for a long moment. "So... I'm going to sleep."

"That's fine."

Teldryn sighed, standing to loosen the fascenings of his robe and shrug it from his shoulders. He hung it up in one of the wardrobes, turning to pull back the covers of his bed. "Fine, stay in here. Just... blow the candles out when you're finished up." Neloth simply waved a hand dismissively at him without looking up from his books. Teldryn slid beneath the covers. The soft scratching of Neloth's quill coupled with the occasional page-turn was enough to lull him into a light sleep.

Teldryn woke several hours later to every candle in the room still lit and Neloth slumped over in his chair. He blinked blearily, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Neloth."

No response.



“Neloth,” Teldryn repeated, louder, pushing up onto an elbow. The mer startled awake with an undignified snort, looking about wildly in a small moment of panic. Teldryn laughed hoarsely. “Blow out the damn candles and go to bed.”

“No, no. I just needed—”

“Go. To sleep.” Teldryn argued, tone sharp. He turned to face the opposite wall and pulled the covers up around his shoulders. Neloth huffed, and Teldryn heard him shuffling papers and closing books, then the room went dark as all the flickering candles went out at once. Teldryn let out a tremendous sigh of relief, the darkness washing over him like a cool breeze. Then he felt the covers shift and a weight join him on the bed.

“Are you serious?”

“What?” Neloth shuffled beneath the covers. “My room is all the way upstairs and I nearly froze half to death last night.”

“You complained every single night we had to share a bed in Windhelm, and yet here you are...”

“It’s merely self-preservation.”

Teldryn laughed in disbelief, but couldn’t say it was unpleasant to have a warm body pressed in beside him. The College was perpetually freezing, it was true, and, despite it all, he’d grown rather accustomed to sharing a bed. Still, something about the situation had Teldryn shaking with silent laughter for a minute longer.

“Stop laughing,” Neloth snapped.

“I’m sorry,” Teldryn chuckled. “It’s just absurd. It’s fine,” he added as he felt Neloth shift irritably. “It’s just absurd.”

They drifted off into silence after that, and despite it all, Teldryn slowly faded back to sleep.

Teldryn’s eyes snapped open as he felt someone gripping his shoulders and shaking him. He flailed in panic, accidentally smacking Neloth in the chin.

“Ah! You s’wit! Calm down, would you?”

“What’s going on? Let go of m—”

“You were thrashing about.” Neloth explained, releasing Teldryn’s shoulders and turning his back to him once again. “Mumbling nonsense. You woke me up. I assume you were having a nightmare.”

Teldryn sat up, pushing his sweat-damp hair out of his face. His heart was racing, eyes wet at the corners, and he felt both incredibly embarrassed and oddly thankful that he wasn’t alone. Neloth said nothing, still facing away, too still to have gone back to sleep. Slowly, Teldryn laid back down, still shivering slightly – from the cold or the dream, he couldn’t tell. Without thinking much, he turned towards Neloth and looped an arm around the mer’s waist.

“Oh no,” Neloth laughed dryly, pulling Teldryn’s wrist away from his stomach. “I am not going to be your cuddle pillow for the evening.”

“Self-preservation,” Teldryn grumbled against the back of Neloth’s neck. “Besides... S’cold.” He jerked his wrist out of Neloth’s grip, pulling the mer tighter against him. The comfort of another body had an immediate soothing effect, barring the fact that said body belonged to Neloth. The heat and pressure were enough to calm him. He heard Neloth swallow.

“If you try anything inappropriate, I swear on Boethia’s—”

“Like you would be so lucky,” Teldryn chuckled sleepily, pressing his forehead against Neloth’s shoulder. He smelled like quill ink and static electricity; like old tomes and just a bit like Solstheim.

Neloth scoffed. “Overconfident...” He shifted, but didn’t pull away, and Teldryn soon found himself drifting back off into a blessedly dreamless sleep.

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Teldryn stirred from sleep slowly, disoriented. The cool light of morning was just beginning to seep through the tall glass windows. His arm was still draped over Neloth’s waist, and the situation seemed suspended in a dream-like state, a startling sense of calm to it. He closed his eyes once again, content to doze for another hour, when he felt the slightest movement – a thumb tracing the ridges of his knuckles. Something in Teldryn’s chest clenched so tightly it was almost painful. The feeling lingered for a long moment, teetering between longing and terror mixed with an odd sense of privilege as he felt Neloth’s thumb make another slow, steady pass, the pad of his finger looping around the bulges of Teldryn’s knuckles ever so lightly. There was a quiet reverence to the small gesture that was startling. Regardless, Teldryn gave in and pressed closer with a sigh, finding Neloth’s fingers and giving them a light squeeze.

Faster than Teldryn thought possible, Neloth sat bolt upright in bed, throwing back the covers and immediately springing to his feet.

“Wha-?”

Before Teldryn could even sit up Neloth had swept from the room in several long strides without a single word. Teldryn blinked at the doorway, unsure of what had just happened. He lay back down, feeling incredibly chilled at the lack of body heat beside him and equally confused. Had he overstepped? It was just a friendly gesture in return. Maybe he’d simply startled Neloth... He let his mind drift for a moment longer before sighing loudly and pushing back the covers, resigned to get up and face the day.

Chapter End Notes

[GAY PANIC](#) (Click for a drawing).

Neloth is barely holding it together, tbh.

Honestly, I think my favorite part of writing this chapter was getting to write Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor Neloth. (And also referencing HTTYD). We're breaking down those walls of yours, Neloth. Ready or not. \*grabs sledge hammer\*

Thanks so much to all my beautiful readers! I've loved hearing from everyone. ;A;  
You're all amazing.

## Chapter 7

### Chapter Notes

Thanks again to FourCat for being such a great beta!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Neloth pursed his lips. He moved his journal next to Hyenril's, comparing their notes. It would have been useful to have Elane's journal as well, waterlogged or not. Still, he felt like there was something he was missing. There was the matter of the sigil stones, of course – he'd need them to properly activate the staves. As far as making the staves functional, his staff enchanter would do the trick. Beyond that, however, was the niggling feeling of missing something crucial – a puzzle piece not yet snapped into place. Neloth was intimately familiar with Daedric forces, artifacts, and all of their various uses throughout Mundus. He'd tangled, quite literally, with Hermaeus Mora for decades. Sigil stones, on the other hand, were rare enough that he had only ever encountered them a handful of times. The type of power they promised was intoxicating, to say the least: to hold open the gates of Oblivion, to travel between planes, explore the vast reaches of Aurbis. He had entire realms of knowledge at his fingertips. He just needed the damn stones.

Summoning the Dremora wouldn't be too terribly difficult. He had the ring. He knew how it worked – theoretically. He just needed the proper environment, and therein was the rub of his current predicament. A summoning circle wasn't just a chalk line on the ground. There needed to be proper correspondences, channels, lines and center points. He was quite sure Elane has found one, if not created her own. Neloth would do the same – he just needed a damn map. His mind was abuzz with lists, perpetually ordering and rearranging. And on top of it all, he couldn't focus. Even as he tried to block it out, that morning kept replaying over and over in his mind.

Teldryn's hot breath on the back of his neck, the weight of his arm across his waist, the brush of his fingertips... He couldn't recall the last time he'd been that physically close to someone. In fact, he'd forgotten what closeness felt like, or perhaps realized that he never quite knew it in the first place – a terrible, exquisite ache blooming behind his sternum, the desire to press closer and abandon the outside world. In the hazy realm of misjudgement that was often an intrinsic aspect of the twilight hours, he had surrendered. It was a foolish indulgence. A sign of weakness. The ache in his chest was probably just indigestion from the greasy Nordic food he'd been consuming. Pressing closer, staying beneath the covers, a tangle of arms and legs... just survival instinct. The damn college was colder than a witch's tit, after all.

Now he had to teach another blasted class on Destruction.

The Hall was cold, because of course it was. The students shivered in small huddles as he collected all the essays from the night before, thumbing through them dispassionately before setting them

ablaze. The crowd of young mages all burst into various reactions of despair and anger which Neloth silenced with a look. The last few pieces of ash from the smoldering papers drifted listlessly to the floor. Neloth dusted off his hands.

“I hope you all learned something through your research. Now, we’ll begin by resuming the drills from yesterday. Partner up.” The grumbling students shuffled off to their respective corners of the hall and Neloth spent the next half hour walking around and picking apart every little thing they were doing wrong. Whereas yesterday he’d thought some of the students showed at least a sliver of promise, today they were bumbling idiots, and he was officially out of patience. His lecture passed in a blur – rhetoric so familiar and basic that he could recite it in his sleep. Finally, the class ended, and the students came by and dutifully thanked him, some more enthusiastically than others. As he was getting ready to leave, three students shuffled over, clearly interested in bothering him.

“Master Neloth, we, um...” The speaker was a young Dunmer girl, worrying the hem of her robes and looking anywhere but Neloth’s face. “Well, my name is... Brelyna,” she mumbled almost too low for him to hear, “and this is Onmund, and you know J’zargo... But anyways, during our research last night, we kind of developed some questions that we were hoping you might be able to—”

“Well then, spit it out.” Neloth crossed his arms, tapping a foot. “I haven’t got all day.”

“Bero’s speech.” It was the Nord who spoke this time, Onmund, squaring his shoulders and lifting his chin. “You told us that both Bero and Malviser were wrong.”

“I told you no such thing,” Neloth corrected. “I asked you to explain why they were both wrong.”

“See?” The Khajiit hissed at them. “J’zargo told you it was meant to be a trick.”

“It was not a trick.” Neloth’s patience was waning. Again. He rubbed at his temples. “What were your questions?”

“So, Bero was convinced that Destruction spells could be merged with the school of Alteration,” Brelyna began. “And it just got us thinking... well...”

“What are the limits of the school of Alteration?” J’zargo asked, tail swishing. “If Alteration is the bending of reality around the mage, then who is to say producing fire out of the air isn’t simply bending reality?”

This was going to be a tedious conversation.

Neloth sighed. “Alteration isn’t simply bending reality around the mage, it’s changing the very laws of nature for a short period of time. This is why it is the most difficult skill to master and takes the most concentrated effort of Will.” He produced a small flame in the palm of his right hand. “Now, without wandering too far into the realms of Mysticism, for I am no Psijic, calling upon the elements is not altering reality, because the elements already exist.” He rolled the flame around in his palm as if it were a ball. “You’re simply using your magicka as a channel to produce effects that are already present. This includes spells that drain life force.”

Onmund elbowed J’zargo in the ribs, producing a yowl. “I told you so.”

“Are we done here?”

“But what about time?” Brelyna asked quickly as Neloth was turning away.

He paused, raising an eyebrow. “What about it?”

“Well, technically, time is a law of nature, right?” She twisted her fingers as she spoke. “So, theoretically, couldn’t a powerful enough mage bend the reality of time?”

“Well.” Neloth let out a small chuckle. “You’re not the first to wonder such things. Nor shall you be the last. But as it stands, the only thing capable of mucking about with time are either the Jills or an Elder Scroll. It’s hard to say if Alteration could extend its reaches to such a phenomenon, or if time could even be considered a law of nature at all.” He tugged at his beard thoughtfully.

“Although, what else, if not time, could possibly illustrate how unreal our reality truly is?” The students blinked at him dumbly. Neloth deflated, eyebrows creasing into a scowl. “Go read *Reality and Other Falsehoods* and let me get back to my business.”

Neloth climbed the stairs to the Acanaeum, turning over the Dunmer girl’s question in his head. The original Staff of Chaos had the ability to open gateways as well as completely obliterate corporeal forms – be it man, mer, beast, or even entire structures. Or so the legends told. The manipulation of time, however... of course Neloth had thought about it. Who hadn’t? No mage worth the robes they wore hadn’t considered tinkering with time. Or mortality, for that matter. Perhaps if he configured the flow of magicka through the sigil stones...

His thoughts immediately evaporated as he turned the corner into the library, eyes landing on Teldryn’s back. The mer sat hunched at one of the tables, several books spread out in front of him. Neloth only wavered for a moment before he sucked in a breath, clenching his hands into fists, and strode over.

“Doing a bit of light reading?” He tried to keep his tone neutral.

Teldryn looked up, lips quirking into a smile. “Just trying to keep my skills sharp.” He held up the book for Neloth to read the title: *A Guide to Better Thieving*. Neloth let out a short bark of a laugh, immediately covering his mouth as Urag’s head snapped up from behind the main desk.

“Very responsible of you,” he whispered after regaining his composure, some of the tension easing from his mind. Perhaps Teldryn wouldn’t mention his brief oversight. That would be for the best.

“How did the second class go?” Teldryn closed the book, setting it atop one of the other stacks.

“Oh,” Neloth waved his hand. “Boring. Monotonous. A few of the students hold promise, but they’re all in the infancy of their studies. Watching child mages toddle about is about as interesting as watching a mushroom tower grow from the ground up.”

“Like I said yesterday.” Teldryn got up and stretched. “You did seem to have quite a knack for it.” Without his armor on, Teldryn looked much slimmer than Neloth usually perceived him to be. Not to mention he was several inches shorter. Had he always been shorter...?

Neloth cleared his throat, shaking himself from his thoughts. “If anything, all of this has assured me that I have no desire to participate in formal academia.”

Teldryn chuckled, but nodded in agreement. “That’s fair, I suppose.”

An awkward silence lapsed between them, during which Teldryn looked at Neloth expectantly, holding his gaze for far longer than was comfortable. Neloth opened his mouth to say something, only to realize he had no idea what he wanted to say, and closed it again. Teldryn smiled, looking away with a shake of his head. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, and Neloth's eyes snapped to the sudden movement, heat spreading across his face and ears once he realized he was staring.

"Orc," he called out, quickly turning away from Teldryn and marching towards Urag's desk. "I was wondering if we might be able to discuss some of the most recent texts I've been reading."

"My name is Urag."

"Yes, yes, I know." He waved the remark away. "Do you take a dinner break?"

"I do, yes. Only an hour, though." Urag crossed his arms, lifting his chin. "Why? Are you asking me out to dinner?"

"We'll be joining the Arch Mage for dinner this evening." Neloth adjusted his scarf, brushing nonexistent dirt from his robes and completely ignoring Urag's comment. "You should attend. Your insight could be useful."

"I'm honored you hold my opinions in such high regard," Urag grumbled flatly.

"Seven o'clock sharp. Savos's quarters," Neloth said over his shoulder as he strode to leave. Teldryn raised his hand in an amicable farewell before trailing after him.

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"You're quite sure it'll work?" Savos asked, sucking in his cheeks, a crease between his brows.

"Summoning the Dremora isn't the issue," Neloth responded. "Moreso, the troublesome part is what to do once they arrive on our plane." He chuckled darkly, taking a sip of shein. "The angry little fetchers will sink their claws into anything within arms reach."

The four of them sat around the arcane pitfire in Savos's private quarters, sharing a bottle of shein after a meal of greasy horker loaf stew and roasted vegetables. Nordic food always had a tendency to sit heavy on the stomach, and the alcohol was making Neloth feel a bit more sedated than he would have liked.

"My suggestion would be to have at least two attronachs summoned," Urag added. "Storm, if you can manage it. Fire doesn't do much to them, but they seem to take a harder hit from shock magicka."

"Do you speak from experience?" Teldryn asked with a smirk, well into his second cup.

Urag jutted out his lower jaw, before returning the smile with a shrug. "We've all been foolhardy in the pursuit of knowledge." He knocked back the rest of his shein, the metal chalice clinking against his tusks.

Teldryn let out a dry laugh. "Indeed." Savos looked a little pale, staring silently into his own cup.

“I’ve most certainly tangled with Dremora before,” Neloth continued. “They’re dangerous, but not undefeatable. It’s the fact that I’ll most likely need to summon at least three in order to get the appropriate amount of sigil stones. And that’s assuming that each Dremora will be carrying a stone on them.”

“They usually do,” Savos offered unhelpfully.

“Yes, but ‘usually’ isn’t good enough. If it comes down to summoning four, five, or even ten Dremora, Teldryn and I are going to need more than just a couple of storm atronachs at our backs.”

“What about fielding?” Urag refilled his cup. “I’m sure you have a few wall spells up your sleeve. If you direct the Dremora right out of the gate, then they’re playing into your hand no matter what.” Teldryn made an impressed noise while Neloth twisted the tip of his beard, pursing his lips.

“Not a bad suggestion, really.”

“By the gods,” Teldryn exclaimed. “I can’t believe my ears.”

“Oh, do shut up, Sero,” Neloth snapped.

Teldryn did not shut up. “The great master wizard of House Telvanni actually agreed that someone else had a good idea. And yet the stars still remain in the sky; the world is still intact.” He extended his flagon to Urag, who returned the cheers with a grin. “That is quite an accomplishment. My commendations to you, sera.”

“Are you both quite done?”

Teldryn and Urag laughed into their cups.

They spent a few more minutes volleying strategy back and forth until the conversation naturally devolved into exchanging old stories, as was tradition when a good bottle of shein was involved. It took awhile for Savos to crawl out of his shell, but once he did, his stories about running the college swung between tales of utter woe to comical anecdotes that had Neloth stifling laughter into the crook of his arm. Teldryn was well enough into his drink that he became more animated when speaking, smiling without reserve, a subtle flush of indigo across his cheeks and darkening the tips of his ears. He was incredibly charismatic when he actually put forth the effort. Neloth tried not to stare. Urag quickly learned that Teldryn was the Nerevarine, which derailed the conversation further, and for once Neloth felt content to sit back and listen. To observe. There were very few people in life that he would consider to be his equals, and even fewer with whom he might voluntarily share their company. Yet here he was, in a frigid, gods-forsaken country of barbarians, in the Arch-Mage’s quarters of a college he’d never in three hundred years have willingly associated with, enjoying the companionship of three other relatively intelligent mer.

He took a calculated sip of his shein, the buzz of the drink washing over him like a warm embrace. In all honesty, he couldn’t recall the last time he’d felt this relaxed. His gaze flickered down at the ring on his littlest finger, glittering in the low light of the arcane fire. Would he simply return to Solstheim after acquiring the staves? A very small, nervous part of him wondered if Teldryn would leave as soon as the mission was complete – move onto the next job, the next patron. The next big adventure. Neloth would return to his tower, to his apprentice, his studies... his routine. The



thought should have brought him relief, but the knowledge that their journey was nearing its end only succeeded in planting a seed of remorse in the depths of Neloth's mind. Which, in turn, made him feel frustrated. There was absolutely no reason to allow his emotions to run rampant like that. He glanced up to see Teldryn looking at him from over the fire pit, Urag and Savos still in mid conversation, gesturing emphatically at each other followed by laughter. An unwanted heat spread across Neloth's face and down his neck, and he quickly took a long sip of his drink, averting his gaze.

"I believe it's time I turn in for the night," Teldryn said with a long stretch and a groan, setting his cup down and pushing to his feet.

"All out of stories, then?" Savos asked a little sadly.

"Oh, I doubt I'll ever be out of stories, but I'm no bard." Teldryn chuckled. "No, it's simply the siren song of a warm bed calling to me."

"Probably for the best," Neloth added. "We have quite the task ahead of us."

"Are you telling me to get my rest? Looking out for my well-being?" Teldryn teased with a lopsided grin. "And here I thought you didn't care." Neloth felt his flush deepen, much to his abject horror. He scowled in retaliation, also getting to his feet.

"I can't have you stumbling about half-awake, putting me in danger, can I?" He lifted his chin. "It's only logical."

"Right, of course." Teldryn was still grinning. He finally looked away and Neloth let out a tremendous exhale, beginning to move towards the exit.

"Thank you so much for the dinner and company, Savos." Teldryn offered his hand. "And it's always a pleasure, Urag."

Savos took his hand with a nod. "Be careful."

"Azura guide you," Urag added, his voice little more than a low rumble.

Neloth and Teldryn walked back to the Hall of Countenance in near silence, bending low against the icy wind that blasted through the courtyard, knocking the snow from their boots in the doorway.

"That was, quite honestly, lovely," Teldryn said, ruffling a bit of the downy flakes from his hair.

"It was pleasant enough," Neloth conceded, stirring a chuckle from his companion.

"...like pulling teeth..." Teldryn murmured, bumping his shoulder against Neloth's as he headed for his room. He spun to face him, walking backwards with a shit-eating grin as he pulled a bottle from an inner pocket of his robes with a wink.

"Did you steal that?" Neloth asked with a disbelieving laugh. "I didn't think you had it in you." Teldryn looked around exaggeratedly, pressing a finger to his lips to shush him.

"I told you I was trying to keep my skills sharp." He chuckled. "Want to share?"

"I think we've both had quite enough to drink."

“Oh, come off it...” Teldryn shook the bottle, the liquid inside sloshing loudly. “When’s the last time you actually let loose?”

“Loose?” Neloth scoffed. “Is this loose? Unraveled, more like it.”

Teldryn turned back around with a shrug. “No fun.”

Neloth followed him anyways.

He let Teldryn pour him a cup, cradling the chalice between his palms and looking down into the liquid as if trying to scry – to divine whether or not he was truly going insane. Teldryn drank straight from the bottle. He’d kicked off his shoes, reclining on his bed and staring thoughtfully at the ceiling.

“Are you going to run away if I ask about this morning?”

Neloth’s stomach dropped. “What about it?” he snapped.

Teldryn left out a silent huff of a laugh, taking a pull from the bottle before looking over at Neloth with one raised brow. Neloth sat his cup down hard, some of the shein sloshing over the edge and onto the small table. He got to his feet.

“This was a terrible idea.”

“Please.” Teldryn sat up. “I’m not trying to run you off. I’m genuinely curious.”

“You mock me.”

“I’m not mocking you! I’m just asking...” Teldryn exhaled sharply, smoothing his hair down along the crown of his head. He gave Neloth a frustrated look, that somehow also managed to be a bit pleading. “Just... sit back down?”

Neloth narrowed his eyes, crossing his arms over the front of his chest, but made no move to sit. The tension in the room made him feel stretched too thin, and more than anything he desperately wished he had just gone up to his own room instead. Teldryn made a big show of rolling his eyes, taking a long swig from the bottle. He wiped his mouth on the back of his arm.

“So, what are you planning on doing once you have your staves?” His speech was the slightest bit slurred, the alcohol also apparently robbing him of his tact.

“Ha!” Neloth couldn’t help the biting laugh. “Do you actually want to know?”

“I don’t know, Neloth.” Teldryn sighed. “Do you actually want to know why I got all of my tattoos?”

That gave Neloth pause. He cleared his throat and looked away.

“It was after my wife was murdered,” Teldryn continued unprompted, pausing only to take another swallow of shein. “Decided I needed to start a new life for myself. New identity. So I moved to Blacklight, changed my name, found the first person willing to mark me up and...” He gestured to

his bare forearms. “Behold. Teldryn Sero was born, whose questionably good swordsmanship and ever-increasing body count was easily waved away with the excuse of being ex-Tong.” He took another drink. “Sorry, it's not nearly as interesting a story as you were probably anticipating.”

Neloth hovered for a moment longer before shuffling to sit back down. He crossed his arms and legs, foot bouncing irritably. Teldryn laughed under his breath, his gaze still glued to the ceiling.

“I don’t know,” Neloth said after another long moment of silence, words fast and sharp. Teldryn shifted to look at him, raising a brow before taking another thoughtful sip.

“What I mean is, I’m not quite sure... what I’ll do with the staves.” Neloth’s foot continued to bounce. “I suppose use them to further my study of magic. Or... Bah!” Neloth waved a hand in front of his face, as if shooing the words away. “That seems so vague a thing to say aloud. But, I...” He made a frustrated noise, grabbing his chalice aggressively, more liquid sloshing out the side and dribbling across his fingers. The shein slid down his throat like cool silk, warming his chest, the thick, herbal taste clinging to the roof of his mouth.

“You want honesty?” Neloth set his cup down, pausing only for a second before letting out a scoff. “Of course you do. You’re nothing if not fatally honest. Well here it is: I have no idea what in Oblivion I’m going to do once I have the staves intact. I haven’t the slightest. Not for lack of thought, of course. Not for a lack of trying. All I have are dreams and fantasies – hypotheses and postulates. Who’s to say any of them are actually feasible?” He took another hefty sip of shein, coughing into his fist and twisting it into a bitter laugh. “When you reach the furthest stretches of magic... when you’re presented with the infinite, given the chance to make the impossible possible, then what do you have left after that? I could create or destroy anything as I please.” Neloth leaned an elbow against the table, scrubbing a hand across his eyes in frustration. “And where’s the fun in that?”

A heavy silence followed his admission, which Neloth chose to fill by gulping down the rest of his shein. It made his head spin. Teldryn continued to look at him, his expression unreadable. Finally, he pushed up to sit on the edge of the bed, extending his hand, gesturing for Neloth’s cup.

“So, if I may,” he filled the chalice halfway, “it sounds to me,” handed it back, “that you hired me to go on this wild adventure with you, nearly got yourself killed, nearly got me killed – asking the impossible, chasing the improbable – all this, simply to prove to yourself that you could do it?” Teldryn’s laughter was dry, but not harsh.

Neloth took a nervous sip, running his tongue across his teeth. “And what if that’s the truth?” He sat his cup down hard again. “What if this has all just been a frivolous test of self-worth birthed out of boredom?”

Teldryn eyed him for a moment before tipping his head back, taking a long pull from the bottle. Neloth watched his throat bob as he swallowed, the coarse hair of his beard stark against the lily-gray skin of his throat. He sighed heavily through his nose, then chuckled as he set the now-empty bottle on the bedside table and wiped his mouth on the back of his forearm.

“Well, to be honest.” He smirked. “It probably wouldn’t have changed a thing.”

Neloth barely registered his own movements as he lunged forward, grabbing onto Teldryn's shoulders and pressing their mouths together with a complete lack of accuracy. The world shifted, tilted, pitched forward. Teldryn tasted like shein. Neloth barely noticed that they'd tipped even further, Teldryn's back pressed into the bed. One arm slung around Neloth's waist, the fingers of his other hand gripping the base of his neck, their hips slotted together. He was kissing back, biting back, furious and unhinged, blunt nails digging into Neloth's skin. Neloth groaned, terrified and elated, rolling Teldryn's bottom lip between his teeth. He'd always hated kissing. He'd told himself so many times how much he hated kissing. But Teldryn arched against him, slow and deliberate, like the push of lava, searing hot. The ache was back, thrumming behind his sternum, deep and sweet, tearing him open from the inside out. He pulled back, just for a moment – just long enough for Teldryn to open his eyes and for Neloth to see all the questions and hesitations that he himself felt – before Teldryn pulled him back down, his mouth open and soft.

Neloth let his weight sink down as his muscles relaxed, his breathing slowed. The nails at the base of his neck turned into soft, sweeping strokes and Teldryn let out a deep, reverberating moan, breath hot against Neloth's face. With a shuddering exhale, Neloth jerked to the side, burying his face into the crook of Teldryn's neck and squeezing his eyes shut. His fingers twisted in the worn fabric of Teldryn's borrowed robes. Teldryn simply continued to run the pads of his fingers along the side of Neloth's neck, occasionally trailing up to brush across the short, bristled hair on his scalp.

He wasn't sure how much time passed, but eventually Neloth lifted his head just enough to look at Teldryn, blinking blearily against the now-blinding light of the arcane torches over the bed. Neloth swallowed as Teldryn's fingers made another pass – so light, so soft – as if he were afraid Neloth might startle, or if he were some kind of wild beast that didn't yet know the meaning of trust.

"Sleep?" Teldryn asked, and even his whisper seemed too loud in the overwhelming silence of the hall. Neloth nodded, his movements feeling jerky and unnatural. Somehow they disentangled, wordlessly shedding as much clothing as the chill of the college would allow before sliding beneath the covers, hot skin against skin. Neloth extinguished the lights with a flick of his fingers, grateful for the darkness – for the lack of sight. Teldryn kissed him again, pushing Neloth back against the bed as one hand cupped his jaw reverently. Neloth couldn't help but feel suspended in a state of disbelief. The buzz of the shein and the pain in his chest left him feeling as though his mind were simply wearing his body as a suit. It seemed impossible. Yet here he was.

He didn't want to have sex. Fortunately, Teldryn didn't seem in any hurry to push such an agenda. He was aroused, though; the obviousness of it was currently pressing against Neloth's hip through his thin pants, which only served to make the entire situation seem even more surreal. To make matters worse, Neloth didn't quite know what to do with his hands, so he let them rest between Teldryn's shoulder blades, occasionally running his fingertips between the grooves of his muscles or tracing the small ridges of his spine. When Teldryn finally pulled away, the scrabble of hair on his chin clung to Neloth's own beard as if their faces were conspiring against them. Teldryn let out a low laugh. Neloth was too frightened to laugh.

"Turn on your side," Teldryn suggested, and Neloth obeyed like a thrall.

They pressed tightly together, just like the night before, though now Teldryn placed slow, deliberate kisses along the line of Neloth's bare shoulder, up his neck, making him shiver.

"Alright?" Teldryn rumbled against his skin.

Neloth just nodded, biting the inside of his cheek. He suddenly realized that he hadn't said a word since the entire thing began. He cleared his throat. "Yes." Just a whisper. Almost lost beneath the distant howling of the wind outside. He wasn't sure if he was lying or not. Nothing about this was alright – this was something so deep and latent and *needed* that Neloth had forgotten it was even a part of him, willfully or otherwise. Teldryn sighed against his neck, pulling him even closer. Neloth let him, grabbing onto Teldryn's forearm and squeezing.

Eventually, Teldryn's breathing evened out, his grip against Neloth's chest going slack. The hall was quiet, and in that moment it felt as if they were the only ones in the entire college. Neloth continued to stare at the far wall, watching the dim light reflect off a large soul gem that sat on one of the shelves. The future was even more of a mystery now than it was before. And for the first time in well over a hundred years...

Neloth was terrified.

## Chapter End Notes

SMORCH. A HEKKIN SMORCH.

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Sources for this chapter:

["The Telvanni Guide to Alteration"](#) by u/FoxWyrd (Their entire "A Telvanni Guide" series is fantastic).

["Proposal: Schools of Magic"](#)

["Response to Bero's Speech"](#)

["Reality and Other Falsehoods"](#)

## Chapter 8

### Chapter Notes

Thanks to [FourCatProductions](#) for being my beta and also yelling at me (lovingly) over this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Neloth was gone when Teldryn awoke, which was about what he'd expected. He rolled onto his back with a groan, stretching his arms up over his head. The shein from the night before had turned into a pulsing headache centered somewhere behind his eyes, and he was left with a dry mouth and the sensation of his skull being too small. He pushed himself into a sitting position, feeling blearily around for his pack to pull out one of the weaker healing potions he'd made before they left Windhelm.

As the elixir hit his tongue and the headache began to lessen, a nervous knot immediately twisted Teldryn's stomach. Reality set back in. Blessed Azura, why did he allow that to happen? Why had he encouraged it? What on Nirn had he been thinking? There was only so much he could blame on the shein. Though, in retrospect, knocking back the stolen bottle wasn't one of the better ideas he'd had. He exhaled loudly, head hanging, forearms resting against his thighs. It had been almost a month since they started this journey. He laughed as he tried to imagine telling his past self that he'd end up being the eager participant in a lip-locking session with Neloth. He probably would have thrown himself off the nearest Telvanni tower. So what had changed?

Teldryn got up and began to get dressed, still a bit unsteady on his feet. The cold of the college bit at his exposed skin, a violent shiver running the length of his body. A few hypothetical conversations with Neloth ran through his head, but none of them felt appropriate, or even really conveyed how he felt. But, then again, how *did* he feel? Oddly enough, 'regret' was not the dominant emotion at the moment. 'Shame' was fairly high up there, 'embarrassment', yes, but 'regret'? Teldryn knew his own faults by now; one of his biggest was greed, and something about Neloth last night made him feel *greedy*. He wanted more – to see how far he could push, to be the one to tear down all the pomp and circumstance, demolish the walls that Neloth worked so hard to maintain. That was what had kept him going when he should have stopped. Seeing Neloth reduced to something attainable, driven by his most basic, fundamental needs... and Teldryn had been the one to do it to him. On one hand, he felt a bit selfish for his conclusion – it was one that diminished Neloth to a mere prize, some sort of feral animal to be coaxed into his home and tamed. On the other hand, he couldn't help the smugness that came with that knowledge.

With a tired sigh, Teldryn finished getting dressed and made his way out of the Hall of Countenance. Neloth wasn't in his room. It appeared as though he would be wandering aimlessly for a bit. He might as well go to the Arcanaeum, he thought. Have a chat with Urag, pretend his world hadn't shifted wildly around him. The wind whipped through the courtyard as he made his way toward the main building. The door seemed even heavier than usual when he pushed into the

Hall of the Elements, throwing his weight back against it to force it closed once more. He spun around, and his stomach dropped as he came face to face with Neloth.

The mer's eyes were wide, his expression wary. He stared at Teldryn as if he were afraid of a sudden attack, hands clenched tightly against his chest.

"Sleep well?" Teldryn asked after a long minute of awkward silence.

Neloth's face twisted into a look of confusion, which warped into amusement, covered immediately by disdain. "What kind of an idiotic question is that?"

Teldryn laughed, somewhat nervously. "An impulsive one?"

"Clearly," Neloth sneered. He straightened up, lifting his chin. "I take it you've recovered well enough from your excessive drinking last night?"

"Oh, you thought that was excessive?" Teldryn crossed his arms, raising an eyebrow challengingly. "That was child's play."

Neloth's snide expression faltered. They were back to silent staring again.

"I wouldn't be opposed to some tea," Teldryn said finally.

"Tea. Right," Neloth agreed quickly. "Well, I'll just..." He pulled a book from where it had been tucked beneath his arm, brandishing it at Teldryn. "I need to return this. Bring your tea and meet me in the Arcanaeum. We should set off for Skytemple Island as soon as we can."

"That's..." Teldryn sighed as Neloth was already turning to walk away. "...not what I meant," he finished under his breath. He rubbed at his eyes in frustration, giving his cheeks a few gentle smacks to wake himself up a bit more, before wandering off towards the nearest alchemy station.

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"I hope you're ready for a fight." Neloth set his pack down on the rocky shore of the Sea of Ghosts, looking out over the water with a grim expression.

Teldryn adjusted his scarf. "Of course I am. I know what we're about to face. Besides," he chuckled, trying to lighten the mood. "I'm the best swordsman in all of Morrowind, remember?"

"Yes, well, I hired you to protect me. So try not to forget that aspect."

Teldryn's jaw clenched. "Of course."

For the most part, Neloth had been pretending as if the night before hadn't happened, which Teldryn honestly should have expected. The old mer's mood had been sour, his temper short, and he'd been holding Teldryn at arms length all morning. Teldryn had done his best to ignore it, but watching Neloth turn his back to him, so unconcerned, finally caused his tenuous thread of patience to snap.

"You do realize that you're treating me worse now than you did before?"

Neloth had a potion of resist cold halfway to his mouth. He narrowed his eyes but said nothing, so

Teldryn continued.

“I thought maybe you’d be a little less insufferable this morning, but of course you’ve never been the predictable type, have you?”

“I’m sorry.” Neloth re-corked the bottle aggressively. “Did you expect me to wake up, don an amulet of Mara, and plan our elopement?”

“I don’t know what I expected, Neloth, but I should have at least known you’d be an intolerable git about it.”

“It was a *mistake*,” Neloth insisted loudly. “You were drunk. Certainly not thinking with your rational mind, and neither was I.”

“Then let’s say we forget about it, hmm?” Behind his mask, Teldryn was smiling. He almost wished Neloth could see it. “Let’s pretend it didn’t happen. I’m just your hired sword, and you’re just an asshole. Cut and dry at the end of the day.”

Neloth pulled the cork out of the resist cold bottle again, giving Teldryn one last hateful glare before tipping it back. He shoved the half-empty bottle into Teldryn’s hands wordlessly before wading out into the water.

The old stone altars and scattered skeletons atop the hill were half-buried in snow, the frozen corpse of the apprentice unmoved and stagnating in her decay.

“We should have at least made her a pyre.”

“It’s not our job to tend to the dead,” Neloth snipped, striding past the ritual site and looking down the other side of the hill. The snow had begun to flurry, obscuring the horizon, and Teldryn felt the need to squint even behind his goggles.

“There!” Neloth pointed excitedly down the hill. “There’s a circle of standing stones near the water’s edge.”

“I can’t see a damn thing,” Teldryn grumbled, shielding his eyes from the blinding white of the cloud-covered sky. “How can you be sure they’re what you need?”

“Well, if they aren’t, then we’ll just have to keep looking. Though, something tells me Elane was close to her goal before she died. The area is practically buzzing with magicka. If I’d had access to her journal, she probably had the entire island mapped out.” Neloth began to descend the hill. “But, as it stands, I do not have her journal. Only my superior intelligence, which should be quite enough.”

“Yes, of course, *Master* Neloth,” Teldryn drawled as he followed, but Neloth either didn’t hear him, or chose to ignore him, traipsing further down the hill.

The ground leveled out, and Teldryn was finally able to see the standing stones. It was most certainly a summoning circle – he’d seen enough of them in his day – and he was immediately struck with an oppressive feeling of impending doom.

“Neloth,” he called out. The old mer didn’t even give him a sparing glance, striding over to the



circle with barely-concealed excitement. “Neloth!” Teldryn tried again.

“What!?” He whirled on Teldryn, mouth pinched. “Something of note to add, *Nerevarine* ?”

Teldryn prickled at the title. “I have a bad feeling about all this.”

“Oh!” Neloth threw his hands out to the side dramatically. “You have a bad feeling about summoning Dremora? How insightful!”

“Would you just...” Teldryn clenched his fists. “Something is wrong.”

“Is Azura whispering in your ear?” Neloth scoffed, setting his pack down and opening the apprentice’s journal.

“Maybe she is!” Teldryn yelled back.

“Well she should have spoken up sooner.” Neloth strode towards the circle. “Ready your weapon.”

Neloth read the journal one last time before flinging it to the side and rolling up his sleeves. With a snapping flourish, lightning surged from his fingertips, clinging to the ground to form a wall. He walked a narrow perimeter, creating a funnel. The lightning crackled and popped, the air burning with electricity and the smell of static. Neloth moved back several paces, twisting the small ring on his pinky as if he were adjusting a knob or tightening a bolt. He began to speak in the infernal language of the Dremora, guttural and harsh, and Teldryn felt the veil between Mundus and Oblivion thinning. A swirling portal emerged in the center of the lightning.

Finally, the tension gave, the veil tearing open, and a hulking Dremora charged out of the portal, sword raised, growling curses at them. It stumbled at the wall of lightning, and Neloth loosed another surge of electricity, striking the Dremora in the center of its chest. It roared in anger. Teldryn stepped quickly to Neloth’s side, Trueflame raised to block. As the Dremora lunged, he intercepted, catching the downswing of its sword. Metal screeched as the weapons slid along each other, and Teldryn shifted his weight to push the Dremora’s blade up and to the side, continuing the momentum into a spin and quickly slicing the creature’s head off. It toppled to the ground, rolling a few feet away. The crackling lightning wall faded, and the resulting silence was almost deafening.

“Well,” Neloth said after a moment. “We made fast work of that.” He sounded just the tiniest bit pleased, but Teldryn was unamused. He sheathed his sword and stomped back off to the side.

Neloth stooped to inspect the headless body, using a telekinesis spell to pull a palm-sized, glowing green stone from between the folds of the Daedric armor. He let out a triumphant little shout, looking to Teldryn excitedly, only to have the grin slide from his face, replaced with his usual scowl.

“We got lucky with this first one.” He snatched the sigil stone out of the air, pocketing it. “The next one might not have one.”

The next one did not have a sigil stone. It did, however, have a storm atronach. The Dremora barreled through the portal, immediately summoning the atronach and letting out a grating, discordant screech. After some ducking, dodging, and a healthy amount of slashing and spell-casting, the damn creature finally fell, its atronach crumbling along with it. Teldryn and Neloth were both breathing hard, mildly singed but still victorious.

“That one seemed stronger,” Teldryn pointed out after Neloth kicked the Dremora’s body in frustration. “Didn’t Urag suggest summoning an atronach of our own?”

“Yes, but I find the idea to be little more than a magicka drain,” Neloth snipped. He dusted off his robes, shaking his hands out before casting another lightning wall around the summoning circle. Teldryn sighed, and called forth his own fire atronach regardless of what Neloth thought.

The third Dremora did have a sigil stone, as well as its own fire atronach. They lobbed roaring fireballs in all directions, melting large swaths of snow and turning the peninsula’s terrain into a slick, treacherous mudbank. Teldryn was incredibly grateful for his heritage when one of the fireballs managed to hit him square in the chest, sending him staggering backwards and landing ass-first into a fresh puddle of melted snow. He cursed loudly as the mud squelched between the plates of his armor, pushed back to standing with a grunt, and hurled his own massive fireball towards the laughing Dremora. The spell slammed into the thing’s face just as Neloth’s lightning bolt made contact with its chest, bringing it to its knees. Teldryn let out a yell, pulling Trueflame from the mud and charging forward, and this Dremora was also relieved of its head. The other fire atronach crumpled into Oblivion, while Teldryn’s glided over to them curiously, beginning to do lazy flips in the air. By the unseen force of Neloth’s spell, the sigil stone slid into view from beneath the Dremora’s robes, glowing orange. Teldryn was too tired to remember not to be pleased. He let out a low chuckle and Neloth smiled toothily as he plucked the stone from the air.

“One more to go.”

“Yes.” Teldryn yanked his scarf down, removing his helmet and resting it beneath his arm. The cold air stung his face, but he took a deep, refreshing breath. He flashed a grin. “Let’s hope the next one is carrying one of the damn things and we can be done with it.”

Neloth was giving him a strange look, mouth twisting to the side as if he were physically restraining himself from speaking.

“What?” Teldryn prompted.

Neloth jumped as if startled, scowling and looking away. “Nothing! Just... put your helmet back on and let’s get this over with.”

“Halt!” someone yelled from the top of the hill.

The two of them spun to look in the direction of the voice as Teldryn quickly re-secured his helmet and scarf. A party of five was marching down the hill towards them, clad in sleek black robes and glimmering golden armor. Thalmor, Teldryn recognized immediately.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Neloth called out, pocketing the sigil stone as he strode towards the group.

“Master Neloth,” the one in the lead spoke, and Teldryn’s lips pulled into a snarl before he could help it. Ancano pulled his hood back with a smug, self-satisfied smile. “How unfortunate that we have to meet like this.”

Neloth rolled his eyes. “Yes, well, whatever it is, get it over with. I have business to attend to.”

Ancano’s expression dropped into a scowl, the muscle beneath his left eye twitching. “I don’t think you understand,” he continued calmly. “You’re under arrest.” The Thalmor behind Ancano drew their weapons, one of them holding a nasty set of magicka-blocking manacles.

“Arrest!?” Neloth let out a bark of a laugh. “For what, pray tell?”

Ancano procured a thin scroll from his inner robe, unfurled it, and began to read.

“Possession of illegal magical artifacts, possession of contraband text in direct violation of the White Gold Concordat, illegal summoning, endangering Winterhold citizens...” He looked up over the edge of the scroll. “The list goes on.”

“This is absurd,” Neloth spat, crossing his arms. “Since when do the Thalmor regulate magical practice?”

“It is no fault of ours that you’ve remained painfully out of touch with the common laws of the country,” Ancano sneered, re-rolling the warrant and returning it to his breast pocket. “Now, if you come quietly, we’ll make sure that you and your,” he gave Teldryn a disdainful look, “accomplice receive a fair trial.” Teldryn felt a spike of fear, but held his ground, bending his knees ever so slightly.

“Ha! I think not!” Neloth lunged, and Teldryn was anticipating it this time: another teleportation spell. The sickening lurch never came, replaced instead by a searing electrical current that caused Teldryn’s muscles to convulse and his jaw to clench. He dropped to one knee as spots danced behind his eyes. Neloth made a pained noise somewhere to his right.

“Ah ah,” Ancano scolded. “You tried the same trick last time. Perhaps you’re growing predictable in your old age.”

Neloth let out a snarl that Teldryn had never heard before, lightning erupting from his fingertips and forming a massive wall between the two of them and the Thalmor. He pulled Teldryn backwards and they both stumbled to their feet.

“We’re going to have to fight them,” he hissed.

Teldryn unsheathed his sword. “Oh, I know.”

Seconds later, the Thalmor came bursting through the lightening wall, brandishing swords and wards alike, electricity ripping through the air. Teldryn immediately re-summoned his flame atronach before rolling out of the way of a down-swinging sword, springing to his feet and pivoting to strike. Neloth had a ward of his own up, hurling lightning at the oncoming Thalmor. The soldier attacking Teldryn dodged his blow, parrying to the left and attempting to slash at Teldryn’s exposed side. Teldryn blocked him, throwing the soldier off balance as he forced the sword away from him.

“Teldryn, behind you!” Neloth shouted, and Teldryn narrowly dodged the swing of a sword over his right shoulder, spinning around to thrust Trueflame upwards. The blade slid between the plates

of the soldier's elven armor, and she gurgled, blood spilling from her mouth as she fell to the ground.

Neloth had been battling the mages, deflecting the long-range magical blows while also slinging his own. One lay dead in the mud, the other on the defense, moving steadily backwards. Ancano was keeping his distance, sending intermittent bolts of lightning with a grim expression. Teldryn grit his teeth and charged him. Ancano's expression dropped into one of abject horror as he turned his attention to Teldryn, firing a bolt of lightning that ricocheted off Teldryn's armor. He continued to barrel forward. Ancano took a stumbling step backwards, tripping and falling into the mud.

"Wait!" he cried out, holding up a mud-covered hand. His voice was so full of terror that Teldryn actually paused, slowing to a stop. Ancano looked up at him, breathing heavily, his expression pathetic and frightened. Then it shifted into a cruel smile.

"TELDRYN!" Neloth yelled from somewhere behind him as bright, terrible pain erupted from the middle of his back, ripping through his entire torso. Teldryn screamed, dropping Trueflame and falling to his knees. He looked down at his own body and a wave of sickness washed over him, coupled with the feeling that what he was seeing couldn't possibly be real: a sword protruding from the center of his stomach.

## Chapter End Notes

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## Chapter 9

### Chapter Notes

I wasn't gonna leave y'all hanging like that for a week. What kind of monster would I be?

(Thanks again FourCat for the beta work!)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first emotion Neloth felt was panic, followed immediately by disbelief – a disbelief so profound that the world seemed to slow around him, as if time itself had begun to warp. He watched Teldryn fall forward, the elven sword's hilt sticking out of his back like a thorn. Ancano scrambled backwards through the mud, his white-blond hair filthy and tangled, yelling something at the soldier standing behind Teldryn. There was a dull roar in Neloth's ears, blocking out all other sound, and he soon realized it was the sound of his own pulse.

He felt the heat of the fire before he realized it was there, the ancestral cloak a maelstrom of fever and fury, completely engulfing him. The mage that had moved in closer yelped and staggered away, throwing up a shield and firing another shock spell. Neloth caught the lightning in his palm, eyes narrowing as he turned to the mage. With sharp exhale, he shot the spell back at its sender, striking him between the eyes and sending him toppling motionless into the mud. He reached out with telekinesis in his other hand to grab the soldier behind Teldryn, shaking as he curled his fingers. The soldier flew backwards and skidded across the stone, hitting one of the massive pillars with a sickening crunch.

Ancano was already running. *Coward*. Neloth sneered and teleported in front of him, blocking his path. Ancano came to a sliding halt with a startled yelp, but Neloth already had him. His body locked up with the force of the telekinesis spell, his eyes wide as Neloth brought him closer, pulling him into contact with his flame cloak. Ancano shrieked in agony, thrashing against Neloth's spell as the skin on his face began to bubble and blister, his hair burning away, curling into ash. Neloth just watched, holding him there until the mer's skin was blackened and the ancestral fires slowly began to die.

He dropped the spell and Ancano's corpse fell to the ground, rolling partway down the hill before sliding to a stop. Neloth's eyes fell on Teldryn's slumped figure, still kneeling in the mud. He teleported over in a blink.

"I can heal you," he was already saying, dropping to his knees. "We just need to get this sword out and I can heal you."

"Neloth," Teldryn rasped. He reached up to pull his helmet off with shaking hands, letting it roll off his palms and fall heavily to the ground. "If you pull that sword out, the only spell you'll be casting is 'reanimate corpse'." He let out a pained groan, the soft pulse of restoration magic shimmering beneath the hand he'd wrapped around the sword's blade.

“What are you doing? Stop that!” Neloth grabbed Teldryn’s forearm. Teldryn pushed him away weakly.

“Don’t... I’m just...” He closed his eyes, swallowing thickly. His teeth and tongue were stained red. “I’m just giving myself a little more time.”

“Please,” Neloth pleaded. “Just let me—”

“Neloth,” Teldryn interrupted again, smiling ever so slightly. “It’s alright.”

“I’m not going to let you die here!” He was yelling now, furious. “Not like this! Not when I can do something about it!”

“Yes you are.” Teldryn sat back on his heels, wincing at the movement. He tipped his head to look up at the sky. “And it’s alright.” He closed his eyes, taking a few shallow breaths. Neloth just shook his head, numb to his core. Nothing about this was alright.

“I just wish...” Teldryn swallowed again. “...just wish I could see the stars.” He laughed a little bit and Neloth moved closer, his robes slick with mud and snow. Teldryn tipped sideways, letting his head fall against Neloth’s collarbone, groaning through his teeth as the sword shifted inside him. Neloth slid a trembling arm tentatively around Teldryn’s waist, his other hand resting against his thigh. He didn’t know what to say. He’d never comforted the dying before. Teldryn’s breathing was becoming more and more shallow and his hand found Neloth’s, squeezing his fingers weakly.

“s alright,” Teldryn said again, his voice pitched low, syllables slurred. Neloth just stared blankly ahead, grip tightening around Teldryn’s waist as he felt his body go slack. His other hand shot up to hold Teldryn’s head against his chest, prevent him from slipping down further, still staring sightlessly out across the snowy shoreline. Teldryn was completely still in his arms.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there, surrounded by dead Thalmor agents and headless Dremora, clutching Teldryn’s lifeless body to his chest as if he were a lost child. His feet were going numb beneath him, his hands frozen, the cold wind biting at his ears as waves crashed against the rocky shore in the distance. He felt... nothing. Just a yawning void in the center of his chest.

The situation felt unreal, as if Teldryn might jump up at any second and have a good laugh at Neloth’s expense. *Oh, you should have seen your face! I really got you!* Neloth would curse at him and shove him away, call him an idiot. They’d summon the final Dremora and Neloth would have everything he needed to fix his staves. Maybe they’d return to the College for one last night before heading back to Raven Rock. Neloth would cast away his shame and better judgement and slide into bed with Teldryn again, let Teldryn press their bodies together, their mouths, let Teldryn do anything he wanted. Maybe they’d even get some sleep...

The warmth from Teldryn’s body was almost completely gone. Of all the times Neloth wished he knew how to cry... even as a child, his wetnurse said he never made a peep. But why would he think of that now, here on a foreign shore, hundreds of miles from home? His mind was scattered to the winds, thoughts unpredictable and disjointed. Memories pressed in on him from all sides, taunting him, assaulting him. More than anything he remembered Teldryn’s lips against his shoulder, the warmth of his chest, firm against Neloth’s back. He pressed his nose to the crown of Teldryn’s head, letting his eyes fall closed as he inhaled, memorizing the smell of his hair. He had to get up. He had to keep going.

He laid Teldryn down carefully in the snow and mud, pushing off of a knee to stand. He pulled the sigil stones from his pockets, rolling them around in his palm. They glowed faintly, emitting a soft hum. What was he going to do? He could summon another Dremora, take the risk. Or...

Or...

"Think, damn you!" He curled his fingers around the stones, tapping his fist against his forehead. "You're a damn Master Wizard of House Telvanni. You can bend all of Mundus to your will!" He looked back down at Teldryn, clenching his jaw before squeezing his eyes shut. He couldn't bring back the dead. No amount of magic could bring the soul back into the body. But...

*"But what about time?" Brelyna asked quickly as Neloth was turning away.*

*He paused, raising an eyebrow. "What about it?"*

*"Well, technically, time is a law of nature, right?" She twisted her fingers as she spoke. "So, theoretically, couldn't a powerful enough mage bend the reality of time?"*

Neloth's eyes snapped open.

He looked down at the sigil stones in his hand, moving them so one sat in the center of each palm. With his own magicka alone, no, of course he couldn't do it. But if his theories were correct, if he really could use sigil stones...

*"Like a Welkynd Stone, then?"*

Teldryn's voice echoed through his head, followed by his own.

*"You have the power of Oblivion in the palm of your hand. An endless supply of power."*

Neloth straightened up. He supposed it was now or never. And if it killed him? He looked to Teldryn one last time. Yes, it might very well kill him. However, for whatever reason, it was a risk he didn't mind taking.

"I hope you've enjoyed your nap," he said.

He dug through their packs, pulling out every potion of restore magicka that Teldryn had made and

downing all except one. Then he rolled up his sleeves and stepped into the center of the summoning circle with more confidence than he felt, a sigil stone grasped tightly in each hand. He paused, taking a deep breath and looking up at the sky. The clouds were thick and gray, snow falling steadily, melting against his face and gathering in the dips of his scarf. *Azura*, he thought silently. He wasn't usually one to solicit the gods for help, but at this point he'd call on them all to get what he wanted. To feel less alone.

*Azura, guide me.*

He began by drawing out his own magicka, prying into the stones, opening them up just enough. The sudden, potent flood of raw power nearly knocked him off his feet, and Neloath couldn't suppress his laugh. *It's possible! It has to be!* He closed his eyes, taking another deep centering breath, feeling the swirling energy of Oblivion gathering around him like a cloak. He focused on the present reality, saw it for what it was, how it currently existed. Ever so slightly, he began to push, bending it, convincing the laws of nature what it should be – what it had always been. Just like breathing water.

He opened his eyes as spacetime flexed around him, pushing back, resisting more than any alteration spell had ever resisted before, but slowly... time began to warp. The world took on a greenish hue and the scenes from earlier phased in and out of his vision like ghosts, moving in reverse – fireballs returning to their atronachs, Dremora leaping backwards into their portals. But how far back would he slide? What if he pushed time too far? Neloath opened his connection to Oblivion further, pushing just a bit more. Sharp pain stabbed through his hands where he held the stones, a burning agony rocketing up his arms and rippling down his spine. He ground his teeth together, pushing against reality as it tried to slide back into place. Not yet. Just a bit more... pushing harder, convincing the laws of Mundus that *his* reality was the correct one. That what had happened, had not. It was as if he were holding back a tremendous weight, a massive ocean wall with cold, choppy water spilling over the top, threatening to come crashing down onto his head. Almost there...

But what if everything reverted? Just like the water breathing spell, what if time righted itself? What if... *What if...*

*No*. Neloath pushed harder, focusing his Will to a needle-thin point. He wasn't altering reality, *he was commanding it.*

Neloath screamed as the connection to his magicka splintered like a bone, and he fell to his knees, the world shifting back into place around him. He doubled over, curling his arms around himself, his entire body throbbing in pain.

"Neloath!"

His head shot up, eyes wide. Teldryn stood there, still in full armor, the buggy eyes of his chitin helmet looking down at him. Disbelief. Followed by an emotion Neloath couldn't quite put a name to. He began to shudder, unable to stop the laughter that bubbled up and out of him. His vision went blurry as he stared at Teldryn's boots.



“What on Nirn is wrong with you?”

“I did it,” Neloth wheezed. “I actually did it.” He laughed a little louder. “Take *that*, Divayth Fyr, you bastard!”

“Neloth,” Teldryn said a little softer, kneeling down next to him. He gently pulled Neloth’s arms away from where he’d wrapped them around himself. “What did you do?”

Neloth’s hands and forearms were blackened, burnt to a crisp, his skin split and bleeding. In the center of each palm the sigil stones had fused into his hands, still glowing and humming faintly. It was excruciating, but still Neloth smiled.

“Something that’s never been done before.” He laughed again and tipped forward, pressing his forehead against Teldryn’s shoulder, closing his eyes and breathing deeply.

“Staves be damned, we need to get you to a healer.” Teldryn had already taken Neloth’s hands into his own, the soft golden glow of Restoration magic pulsing between them, ringing like tiny bells. Neloth couldn’t stop smiling, still shaking with quiet laughter. A long moment of silence passed between them and Neloth allowed himself to simply breathe. Finally, he heard Teldryn open his mouth as if to say something else, but jerked to attention at the sound of voices at the top of the hill.

“Who in Oblivion?”

“Thalmor,” Neloth said, straightening up. “Here to arrest me.”

Teldryn looked back to him. His expression was hidden behind his helmet, but Neloth could feel the unspoken question. He just smirked.

“I’ll try my best to put it into terms you’ll understand. But later.” He groaned, leaning on Teldryn as he attempted to stand. “For now, we need to try to talk our way out of this. I don’t think I’ll be able to cast any time soon.”

Teldryn let out a low chuckle. “Well, luckily, that’s something I can do.” He unstrapped his bracer and pulled his right glove off. On his middle finger sat a glimmering ring – a moon and star. “I can be incredibly convincing.”

“Halt!”

Teldryn kept an arm around Neloth’s waist as the figures approached. “My patron is wounded. I need to get him back to the college.”

“Your patron,” Ancano sneered, removing his hood, “is under arrest.”

“For what crimes?” Teldryn pressed.

Ancano read the list again, though the bit about illegal summoning was noticeably left out, making Neloth wonder whether or not anything was actually written on the paper at all, or if the mer was simply flying by the seat of his pants.

Ancano rolled the scroll back up with a sneer. “Need I go on?”

“With what proof?”

Ancano’s sneer faltered. “I beg your pardon?”

“These are relatively serious accusations,” Teldryn continued. “I’m simply asking you to provide proof.”

“Both of you fled from Thalmor questioning on the eve of Frostfall the-”

“We were awoken in the dead of night and frightened. Had the agents you sent approached us in a more agreeable manner and at a more reasonable hour, that would not have been the case. But I believe all we owe, in that respect, is a small fine to the Pale’s hold. Which we have no issue paying.”

Ancano smoothed his hair down, glancing to the side. The two mages with him had their arms crossed, staring at him impatiently.

Ancano cleared his throat. “Be that as it may, I have it on good authority that—”

“Good authority is not proof, serjo,” Teldryn interjected. “Now, as you can see, Master Neloth has suffered a good deal of injury from some experimental, albeit *legal*, magical practice, and I must get him back to the College. Should you need to search our rooms, you’re free to do so, but I assure you, you’ll find no contraband.” This was true: they would find nothing of note in their rooms, because the staves were locked away in Urag’s vaults, on Teldryn’s insistence. Neloth would have to remember to praise him once this was all over. Ancano turned to Neloth, his pointed features marred with fury and outrage.

“And what do you have to say for yourself? You’ve been awfully quiet.” He smiled unkindly. “I didn’t think you the type to be spoken for. Especially by some no-name merc with a smart mouth.”

“Oh, no, I think he covered everything quite well.” Neloth smiled pleasantly. “But, I am in a great deal of agony, so, if you don’t mind...”

Ancano opened his mouth to speak but one of the other agents tugged roughly on his elbow, pulling him out of the way and allowing Neloth and Teldryn to pass. Neloth heard one of them whisper something about a ‘waste of time’ and his smile widened. He turned his gaze skyward to see bits of azure blue peeking through the clouds. Teldryn’s arm was still wrapped around his waist, and Neloth leaned into him a little more than was probably necessary.

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“Will you stop fussing?”

Teldryn pointedly ignored him, continuing to unwrap the bandages around Neloth’s hands. “You have to keep them clean, you stubborn old s’wit.”

Neloth’s hands were still raw and sensitive, the new skin a soft dove-grey and thin as parchment. Everything felt too tight, as if his skin might split at any moment, and sometimes it did. The fused

sigil stones were now trapped beneath his new flesh, hardened mounds that might be mistaken for large cysts or growths. Neloth didn't like to look at them. He felt deformed and crippled, averting his eyes as soon as Teldryn unwound the last of the gauze.

"Just a few splits," he murmured, more to himself than anything, Restoration already glowing softly in the palm of his hands.

It had barely been twenty-four hours since the incident. As soon as they'd gotten back to the College, avoided the mild hysteria of Savos and the prying questions of the rest of the faculty, Teldryn had led Neloth to the nearest bed, into which he'd fallen and slept for almost twelve hours. He awoke delirious at one point, sweating and shivering, reaching out into the darkness with an ill-concealed whimper. Teldryn was there, and Neloth barely held back a choked-off sob, pawing at him with bandaged hands until Teldryn crawled beneath the covers and pulled Neloth against his chest. He'd later ascribe his pathetic emotional outburst to injury and fever.

He watched Teldryn as he inspected Neloth's hands like a seasoned healer, seated next to the bed and wearing the borrowed College robes once again. He hadn't told Teldryn the full extent of what he'd done – he wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to. Teldryn hadn't asked for clarification, either. He seemed to just... understand. Then again, who better to understand such unspoken things than the Nerevarine?

"I think we can switch to the thinner bandages," Teldryn mused.

"Why do you say we?" Neloth grimaced. "They're my miserable hands, not ours."

Teldryn looked at him with a quirked brow, clearly amused, but didn't clarify. Neloth hated how much he wanted to kiss him. They hadn't, yet... kissed again, that was. At least Neloth didn't think they had. His memory was a bit foggy from his feversleep, and he wasn't quite sure if the brush of Teldryn's lips against his temples had been real or part of a very convincing, very comforting dream.

"So what now?" Teldryn asked after a stretch of silence, his focus still directed towards Neloth's hands, methodically winding the bandage around his palm, threading it between his fingers.

Neloth sighed, looking up at the ceiling. "A respectable question that I don't have an answer to."

"Your honesty is quite refreshing, you know," Teldryn smirked as he set Neloth's right hand down, beginning to wrap his left.

"Glad to hear you're feeling refreshed," Neloth quipped with a thin smile. "I simply don't see any reason to lie. My expedition was, quite honestly, an astonishing failure. So as to what comes next..." He paused, chewing on his lower lip as he continued to gaze at the ceiling. "Return to Solstheim, I suppose."

"Well, whatever you decide, I'm right behind you."

Neloth blinked down at Teldryn, a bit baffled. "You're what?"

"I'm still in your service," Teldryn explained without looking up. "Until you release me."

"Oh..."

A long beat of silence passed between them during which Neloath tried to calm his racing heart. Teldryn continued to steadily wrap his hand. Finally, Neloath cleared his throat.

“What if I said you were released, then? As of right now.” He furrowed his brow. “I release you from my service.”

Teldryn sat Neloath’s left hand down, a small smile on his lips. “Well, to be honest, it probably wouldn’t change a thing.”

Neloath wasn’t sure what to say – how to react. There had never really been a time in his life that he could remember where someone had willingly chosen to remain in his company. Not like this. His expression must have said enough, because Teldryn was moving closer, leaning in. Neloath made an incredibly undignified sound as Teldryn pressed their mouths together, his bandaged hands trailing shakily up Teldryn’s arms. Somehow, Teldryn managed to climb onto the bed without Neloath noticing, straddling his hips, all without once breaking their kiss, which was becoming more fervent, more desperate. Teldryn’s mouth was so soft, so warm. And wet. Neloath felt heat coiling in the pit of his stomach as Teldryn pressed his tongue past Neloath’s lips. The bandages were stiff and left just the tips of his fingers exposed, but that was enough. Neloath carded his fingers through Teldryn’s hair, ghosted them down the back of his neck, dipped them beneath the collar of his robes to feel the smoothness of his skin. Heat rolled off of him like a hearthfire.

Once the fervor of the kiss began to cool, Neloath was, once again, overwhelmed with exhaustion. He ushered Teldryn beneath the covers with a few non-verbal grunts and hand motions, which made Teldryn chuckle at his expense.

“Don’t laugh at me,” Neloath snapped. “I’m simply tired.”

“You know, for someone who... oh, what did you say?” Teldryn wrapped his arm around Neloath’s waist, pulling him down to lay across his chest. “Trained himself to need only a few hours of sleep every two or three days? You tend to sleep a lot.”

“How *very* dare you,” Neloath scolded through a laugh, burying his face into the crook of Teldryn’s neck, smiling so wide it felt as though his face might split in two. He exhaled, heart still hammering, before murmuring, “What have you done to me?”

“I’m quite sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’ve drugged me. Poisoned me.”

“And wouldn’t that be convenient for your narrative, hmm?”

Neloath laughed again, feeling delirious, though not from his fever. Teldryn was massaging the base of his neck, and Neloath took a moment to relish the warmth of his body, the way his chest expanded and contracted with each breath, the gentle thrum of his heartbeat beneath Neloath’s ear. The fact that he was alive.

“So you’re not sick of me then?” Neloath couldn’t help but ask. He felt pathetic.

“Oh, I absolutely am.” Teldryn’s laughter reverberated through Neloath’s body. “But at this point I don’t think I’m able to be rid of you.”

Neloth raised himself up on his forearms, looking Teldryn in the eye. He was met with an unwavering stare, half grit, half amusement.

“I...” Neloth swallowed. “I don’t know...” He faded off, realizing he wasn’t sure what he wanted to say. ‘He didn’t know how they got here?’ ‘He didn’t know if he could do this?’ Neither of those phrases seemed correct or relevant. Teldryn traced the creases at the corner of Neloth’s eye with his thumb, waiting patiently.

“It’s alright not to know sometimes,” Teldryn said after a long beat of silence. “Sometimes you have to flounder before you learn to swim.”

“Spare me your anecdotes, Sero,” Neloth grumbled. “I’m your elder, remember?”

Teldryn grinned. “I don’t think you’d ever let me forget.”

They fell back into a kiss, unhurried, exploratory, until Neloth could no longer ignore the call of sleep, pulling him down like a sinking anchor. They resituated and Teldryn was at his back, pressing his lips against Neloth’s shoulder, just as he’d done before, just as Neloth imagined he’d do again. His body was warm and solid, a sublime comfort so foreign, yet so essential. And for once, after centuries of discipline, isolation, and study, Neloth allowed himself to fall into sleep without any remorse whatsoever.

## Chapter End Notes

For those not up on Morrowind this-and-that, Teldryn's [ring](#) that he flashes is an artifact of Nerevar. It fortifies personality and speechcraft, which is what he used to become Hortator and unite the Great Houses.

In this case he used it to just talk his way out of an arrest.

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One more chapter to go! Thanks so much to everyone single one of my readers so far. You guys are absolutely amazing. This story is my baby and Neloth makes my heart hurt.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

Thanks so much again to FourCat for being such an amazing beta! You are my king and I owe you everything.

**CW: Explicit sexual content!**

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The passage to Solstheim was relatively smooth, all things considered. Neloth and Teldryn had spent a good majority of the ride below deck, doing their best to avoid seasickness. They came above board just as the sun was setting, the Solstheim port bobbing on the horizon. Teldryn leaned over the side of the ship, looking out across the dark waters, the cool ocean breeze ruffling his hair. The Red Mountain loomed in the distance, spewing plumes of ash and smoke, darkening the sky to a dusky maroon as the sun slipped below the horizon.

“Home sweet home,” Neloth drawled, moving to stand at Teldryn’s side, hands clasped behind his back.

“Honestly, I didn’t think I’d miss Solstheim,” Teldryn mused. “Yet I can’t help but feel a little relieved.”

“I missed my tower more than I missed Solstheim. My routine.”

“Oh?” Teldryn turned to lean back against the ship’s railing, looking up at Neloth with a smirk. “A day in the life of a Master Wizard of House Telvanni? Intriguing. I can’t wait to witness it.” He paused, quirked a brow. “If you’ll let me.”

Neloth gave him a once-over. “If you think that, going forward, you’re going to be able to simply bat your eyes and get what you want, then you are sorely mistaken.”

“Is that so?” Teldryn leaned into Neloth’s space, reaching up to straighten his scarf, flattening his hands over his chest. “I *will* put that to the test, you know.” He let his arms slide down Neloth’s sides, pulling him closer with a firm yank, their hips colliding. An indigo flush spread up Neloth’s neck and across his cheeks, his eyes going wide.

“Will you control yourself!?” He shoved Teldryn away weakly. “The Nords are staring.”

“Are they?” Teldryn pulled him back, holding him tighter. “I didn’t notice.”

Neloth melted whenever Teldryn kissed him. It was so satisfying. Teldryn secretly hoped he never stopped having that effect. Nord stares be damned. Teldryn snaked a hand up to cup the back of Neloth’s neck, pressing up against him harder, biting gently at Neloth’s lower lip.

“Mmph.” Neloth pulled away, placing a hand against Teldryn’s chest. “If you’re quite done.”

“Such a tease.” Teldryn grinned, leaning towards him even more. Neloth jerked his hand back with

a grimace, inspecting his palm. Teldryn watched him run a thumb over the lump in its center.

“What do they feel like?”

Neloth looked up, still scowling. “Like a knot of wood in the center of my hand.”

Teldryn shuddered, the very idea making his skin crawl. Neloth looked morose in a way he’d never really seen before.

“Well, what about when you do magic?”

“What about it?”

“What happens to them, I mean.” Teldryn nodded towards Neloth’s hands.

Neloth closed his fists tightly, his eyes glassy and distant as he looked out over the water. Then, slowly, he unfurled his fingers, pulling magicka into his palms. The two knots lit up beneath his skin, pulsing and rippling with light. He quickly stopped the spell, dropping his hands to his sides.

“I’m not sure how I feel about it quite yet.”

Teldryn hummed thoughtfully, taking one of Neloth’s hands into his own and turning his palm face up. “Well, I suppose you got your arms of chaos after all.” He grinned.

Neloth just stared at him, his expression a mixture of disbelief and disgust. “I should have you thrown overboard. Because that...” His expression started to crack. “That was unforgivable.” Teldryn threw his head back and laughed, far too pleased with himself. Neloth silenced him with a kiss.

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It was too dark to make the hike back to Tel Mithryn, especially with the Ash Spawn still roaming the island – or so Teldryn finally convinced Neloth. He slapped down some of his coin on the bar of the Retching Netch, ignoring Geldis’ incredulous look.

“One room?” he repeated. “You know we have plenty of space...”

“Can’t afford it,” Teldryn lied. “Besides, my patron here doesn’t really sleep.” He jerked his chin in Neloth’s direction; he sat at one of the far tables in the tavern, scribbling away in his journal.

“I don’t envy you,” Geldis sighed, sweeping the money off the counter and into his hand. “Having to follow that madman around.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad once you get used to him,” Teldryn chuckled. “But it has been a long journey. Could I possibly reserve the washroom as well?”

Geldis glanced over Teldryn’s shoulder at Neloth. “For him, too?”

“If it’s no trouble.” Teldryn slid more gold onto the counter.

Geldis took it quickly, pocketing it and giving Teldryn a polite smile. “None at all.”

Neloth looked up as Teldryn walked back over, hungrily eyeing the bowls of ash yam stew in his hands. “Finally. Something other than Nordic slop.”

“Cheers to that,” Teldryn agreed, setting the bowls down and pulling the bottle of sujamma from beneath his arm. He poured each of them a shot, and Neloth actually raised his small ceramic cup for a toast.

“Here’s to a miserable failure of an expedition,” he declared with a thin smile.

“An absolute waste of time and resources,” Teldryn agreed with a grin. Neloth’s smile turned more genuine and he averted his eyes, looking down into his cup. Teldryn wanted to kiss him, right then and there. He wanted to show Neloth that he didn’t care who saw – that he wasn’t ashamed of him. Instead, he clinked their cups together and knocked back the shot, Neloth doing the same.

“I reserved the washroom.”

“Oh?” Neloth took a bite of his stew, still prim and proper despite his apparent hunger. “I should have expected as much.”

“For you as well.”

Neloth looked at him with a furrowed brow. “Are you implying that I stink?”

“Yes,” Teldryn nodded with a pleasant smile, leaning forward against the table. “For the love of Azura, please take a fucking bath.”

Neloth snorted into his stew, setting his spoon down and wiping his mouth aggressively. “Can’t argue with that kind of honesty.”

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Teldryn was reclined on the bed reading a book when Neloth finally finished up with his bath. He shuffled back into the room wearing a long, tattered robe that seemed too big for him – one of the spare ones left for guests. It hung loosely off his frame, one side threatening to slide off his shoulder. He closed the door behind him and simply stood facing Teldryn for a long moment, looking small and unsure of himself.

“Feel better?” Teldryn asked after a beat, setting his book down on the bedside table.

Neloth gave one jerking nod. “A bit.” Tension and unease rolled off him in waves, and Teldryn knew why. They’d been somewhat intimate in the past week, traveling from the College to Windhelm, squeezing into beds together, unable to keep their hands off each other, but nothing beyond heavy petting.

“We don’t have to do anything,” he offered. “If you don’t want to.”

“It’s not that,” Neloth snapped. He exhaled sharply, stepping over to the bed and sitting down. He stared at the door for a long moment. Teldryn cautiously crawled over to him, keeping his distance.



“I want to touch you,” he confessed. “May I?”

Neloth scoffed. “Of course.” He still sucked in a breath as Teldryn pushed the loose side of the robe the rest of the way off of his shoulder. Neloth was so thin without all the armor and padding; his shoulders were bony, his collarbone prominent, the corded muscles of his neck tense. Teldryn could see his pulse fluttering beneath the skin of his throat. He moved closer, situated himself at Neloth’s back, pressed a kiss at the juncture of his shoulder and neck.

“Do you actually find me attractive?” Neloth asked suddenly, his hands fidgeting in his lap.

Teldryn hummed against his skin, placing another kiss higher up on his neck. “Believe it or not, I do.” Another kiss, just behind the hollow of his ear and Neloth shivered. “It’s... sort of the entirety of you.” He let his lips brush against Neloth’s jawline as he spoke. “And the fact that you let me do this.”

“Fascinating,” Neloth whispered, closing his eyes and leaning back against Teldryn, baring his neck a little more.

Teldryn wrapped his arms around Neloth’s chest, one hand sliding beneath the robe, the pad of his thumb ghosting across a hardened nipple. Neloth jolted, tried to pull away, then relaxed again with a shaky exhale.

“How long has it been?” Teldryn pulled Neloth tighter against him.

There was a short pause before he answered. “A long time.”

“Have you been with many men?”

Neloth let out an amused chuckle. “I’ve only been with men.”

“Ah...” Teldryn thumbed across Neloth’s nipple again, eliciting a hiss and a low groan. “Well then tell me what you want. What do you like?”

“I never *liked* it, really...” Neloth grumbled, and Teldryn paused, pulling back. Neloth grabbed onto his arms with a shuddering grip. “But that’s not to say I don’t...” He exhaled sharply again. Teldryn could feel the knot in the center of Neloth’s hand pressing into his forearm. “Nobody has really asked me that before. So, I don’t have an answer. Yet.” His expression was so raw and openly nervous that Teldryn couldn’t help turning Neloth’s face towards him, pressing their mouths together, nibbling at Neloth’s lips as he felt fingers thread through his hair.

Neloth took control then, pushing Teldryn onto his back, climbing between his legs, kissing him furiously. His body hovered just out of Teldryn’s reach, maddeningly close; close enough to feel the heat radiating from beneath the robes like a molten fissure. Teldryn growled against Neloth’s mouth, digging his fingers into the meat of his sides and rolling his hips upwards. They both groaned at the contact – blessed contact – and thank the gods Neloth was just as hard as he was. Teldryn pushed until Neloth’s knees slid back just enough and their hips were flush. Something seemed to flip in Neloth’s head, then. He pulled back, aggressively shrugging the robe from around his shoulders and letting it fold thickly around his waist, before ducking down for another kiss. Teldryn ran his hands anywhere he could reach, raking his nails down Neloth’s back, sliding beneath the belt of his robe. He felt Neloth’s arousal hot against his stomach, and he was suddenly very, very upset that his pants were still on.

Through a bit of scrambling, Neloth biting down almost too hard on Teldryn's shoulder, and some general resituating, Teldryn found himself refreshingly nude and on his back. Neloth was still on the offensive, almost driven into a frenzy. Teldryn had been with aggressive lovers before; he liked them. It was nice to relinquish control when the rest of his life felt like nothing but a perpetual battle for it. Neloth, however, was... *different* . He seemed aimless and unhinged, occasionally doing something that seemed out of place or forced, as if he'd read it in a book – like when he licked all the way from the dip of Teldryn's throat to the tip of his ear, then looked thoroughly put-out when Teldryn laughed at him and told him not to do that again.

“Well, then show me what I should be doing.”

Teldryn smiled. “Gladly.”

That was how Teldryn ended up between Neloth's legs, licking a long, slow stripe up the underside of his cock before taking as much of his length into his mouth as he could manage. Neloth had buried his face in the crook of his arms, his head thrown back, mouth open, panting raggedly. Teldryn couldn't believe the thought was even crossing his mind, but Neloth had a nice cock. It was a good length, width; it was thick and hot against his tongue when he hollowed his cheeks and *sucked* . The noises coming from Neloth made Teldryn grind his hips down into the bed, his own cock twitching, searching for any friction he could find. Finally, he felt Neloth's thighs tensing around him, his knees locking, and Teldryn pulled off with a filthy, slick noise. Neloth cursed loudly, slamming his fist into the bed.

“B'vehk, why in the blazes did you stop!?” he whined, looking down at Teldryn with barely concealed agony, sweat glistening on his forehead.

“Because I want you to fuck me.”

Neloth blinked. “Really?”

Teldryn nodded, sucking on the tip of Neloth's cock one last time. Neloth's eyes fluttered closed, his head falling back against the bed as he let out a shuddering groan.

“I won't last very long. Not after all that...”

“I won't either,” Teldryn agreed. “It's... been a while for me.”

“You mean a month at most?” Neloth laughed breathlessly. Teldryn bit the inside of his thigh and Neloth's laugh turned into a hiss and a groan.

“I don't really have anything, though. To ease the way.” Teldryn grimaced. “I didn't exactly pack with the expectation of falling into bed with you.”

“Ah,” Neloth pushed up onto his elbows with a smirk, looking boyish and pleased. “And here I thought of you as constantly over-prepared.” Teldryn surged up the bed to kiss him.

In the end, all it took was a bit of creativity and far more saliva than Neloth seemed comfortable with. One of Teldryn's knees was cradled in the crook of Neloth's arm as he pushed in, so slowly it felt like nothing was happening, just pressure. Teldryn closed his eyes, breathing through his nose, willing himself to relax. He hadn't been lying when he'd said it had been a while – he'd meant it had been a while since he'd been on the receiving end of things. Once Neloth pushed past the last

bit of resistance, he slid in all at once, and Teldryn's gasp quickly turned into a deep moan as he fisted the sheets.

"Alright?" Neloth asked nervously.

"More than alright," Teldryn chuckled with a grin. He rocked back against Neloth experimentally, and they both groaned. "Yeah, this is more than alright..."

Neloth brought Teldryn's other knee up, pushing his thighs to his chest as he leaned forward, bracing his hands at Teldryn's sides as he began to curl his hips. Teldryn bit his lips though a smile, twisting the sheets harder in this grip as his pleasure began to build. He'd almost forgotten how good this could be – the full-body flood of sensations, the way he could feel the drag of Neloth's cock inside him, so vivid, the stretch just right, but also not enough. Fire danced along his nerves; each thrust like a rolling wave of thunder, lightning striking the soles of his feet, making his toes curl. He brought his hands up to hold onto Neloth's shoulders, crossing his ankles at Neloth's low back, which was damp with sweat. Teldryn's cock was throbbing against his stomach, his balls hitched high and tight. His skin felt too small, too restricting. Suddenly, Neloth pulled away, sitting up.

"Turn over."

Teldryn's laugh turned into a groan as Neloth pulled out. "I should have known you'd get bossy."

"Oh." Neloth smiled far too sweetly, slowly leaning forward until their noses brushed. "Please turn over?"

Teldryn's breath caught in his throat and all he could do was crawl onto his hands and knees. He let out a long, shuddering moan as Neloth lined himself back up and pushed in to the hilt without hesitation.

"By the Gods..." Teldryn dropped to his forearms, grunting as Neloth picked up the pace. The angle was electrifying, almost too intense. After a moment he realized that the noises he heard were coming from himself – low, primal grunts and growls, punched out of him with each driving thrust. The slap of skin on skin was lewd and Teldryn was suddenly struck by how surreal the entire situation felt. He reached between his legs to take himself in hand, pressing his cheek against the rough mattress. Neloth's fingers were digging into the juncture of his thighs, pulling him back to meet each forward thrust, his entire body jolting each time their hips connected. Teldryn felt his climax beginning to swell, his own pulse throbbing in his ears as he continued to make muted, guttural noises against the mattress, tugging himself almost too roughly. Behind him, Neloth gasped, curling over to press his forehead between Teldryn's shoulder blades, wrapping an arm around Teldryn's chest as his hips lost their rhythm, grinding helplessly as he found his release with a quavering moan. That was all it took. Teldryn bit down on the sheets, eyes rolling back as he shuddered and came into his hand with several loud exhales. His knees finally slid out from beneath him, and he grunted as Neloth collapsed on top of him.

"Mmph..." Teldryn protested weakly, one final groan squeezed from his lungs as Neloth slowly pulled out and rolled off him. They both lay in silence for a long moment, unmoving, each trying to catch their breaths. Finally, Teldryn pushed up to his elbows, glancing to his left where Neloth lay on his back, eyes closed and still breathing heavily.

"I could go for another bath, honestly." .

Neloth cracked an eye open, the corner of his mouth tugging upwards in the faintest hint of a smile.

“It’s a messy business.”

“Very.” Teldryn rolled onto his back, stretching indulgently before swinging his legs off the bed and rocking to his feet. He grimaced and reached for a nearby towel, wiping up the absolute mess on his stomach as well as what was steadily trickling out of him and down his thigh. Neloth had slung an arm over his eyes, but otherwise remained unmoving. Teldryn smirked and walked over to him, tossing the towel across his hips.

“Clean up. You’ll thank yourself later.”

“How are you even standing right now?” Neloth let the arm over his eyes fall heavily against the bed. “I feel like I’ve been drugged.”

“It’s called an orgasm.”

This earned Teldryn a scowl, though only a half-hearted one. He took a long pull from his waterskin as Neloth sluggishly wiped himself off and managed to crawl under the covers with a heavy sigh. After extinguishing the candles in the room, Teldryn joined him. He couldn’t help but chuckle when Neloth’s long, thin arms wrapped around him like a vice, their knees knocking together.

“If I’d have known an orgasm would have made you not only agreeable, but cuddly, I think I probably would have made you come much sooner.”

“Do shut up.” Neloth pulled Teldryn even closer. “Is it Nerevar that gives you all that stamina?”

“It’s probably the Corpus.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not catching.”

Neloth’s laugh was a bit delirious. He pulled Teldryn in for a slow, lethargic kiss that made something deep in his chest ache. The way Neloth’s fingers ghosted across his skin with that same quiet reverence he’d felt the first time, when it was just the brush of a thumb across his knuckles. It was as if touching Teldryn was a privilege that Neloth didn’t quite feel worthy of – an odd shift in character considering that Neloth felt entitled to nearly every other aspect of his life. Teldryn soothed his hand along Neloth’s side, over the slight hills and valleys of his ribs, across the flat of his low back, mapping the angles of his body. The moment was soft and startlingly intimate, and Teldryn wondered for the first time what a partnership with Neloth might actually look like. Had anyone ever given him the chance? A fierce protectiveness bloomed behind his sternum, and Teldryn rolled onto his back, pulling Neloth against his chest, clutching him tightly.

“Sleep?” Teldryn suggested, his own voice little more than a raspy whisper.

Neloth sighed against Teldryn’s neck. “Please. Yes.”

It took a bit for Teldryn to drift off. Neloth’s breathing evened out almost immediately, his entire body going slack. Teldryn continued to absently trail his fingers between Neloth’s shoulder blades, staring up at the darkened ceiling. His mind churned with hypotheticals, with uncertainty and

wonder. Looking back on his life, his path seemed to meander wildly, and he often wondered how much of Nerevar really was at the reins – how much of his life was under his own control, or how much had simply been fated. Prophesized. He turned to press his lips to Neloth's forehead, just resting them there. Somehow, this felt like the most control he'd had over his own life in a very long time. It was baffling.

Neloth sniffed awake, pulling away from Teldryn with a grunt and turning onto his side. He weakly pulled on Teldryn's wrist, and Teldryn huffed in amusement, looping his arm around Neloth's waist and pressing in close.

He didn't dream of deformed, eyeless monsters, the molten core of the Red Mountain, or the sightless stare of a golden mask. Instead, Teldryn dreamed of the Borealis reflecting off freshly fallen snow. He dreamed of two mountain birds, darting between the jagged peaks and building nests – of hearth fires and mulled wine, of wood smoke and cold, fresh air. And when he woke to Neloth's warm back still pressed firmly against his chest, Teldryn decided it wouldn't be completely terrible if they found themselves in Skyrim again.

## Chapter End Notes

ARG... Okay. Thanks so much to everyone that joined me on this journey, read this fic, left some comments.... I'm just blown away by the response and the love. I seriously cannot stress enough how much the feedback has meant to me.

And!!! This may not be the last fic I write staring these two cranky elves!! I have a whole sequel swirling around in my head... but it's competing with a lot of other plot bunnies at the moment. We'll see who wins out.

Nevertheless - I have some amazing fanart and some stuff that I've drawn myself that I want to share, so stay tuned for at least one more chapter for all that!

I've also had some "deleted scenes" in the works - aka stuff that's happened "off camera", so to speak, that I've written up and want to share. This story may be over, but I'm not quite done posting. >:3

You're all amazing and beautiful. Let me know that you read this! Let me know what you think!! And, until next time, this is Topsy signing off. ~<3

# Art! Art! Art!

## Chapter Notes

Ahhh the fanart chapter, at long last!!

This is the first story that I've ever really gotten un-prompted fanart for, so I was *really* excited to receive those.

I'm also gonna include some of my own gay-ass art here at the end as well.

Enjoy and go support these lovely artists!! If you've read this story and have fanart you want me to feature, just leave a comment or find me on instagram! @thana.topsy

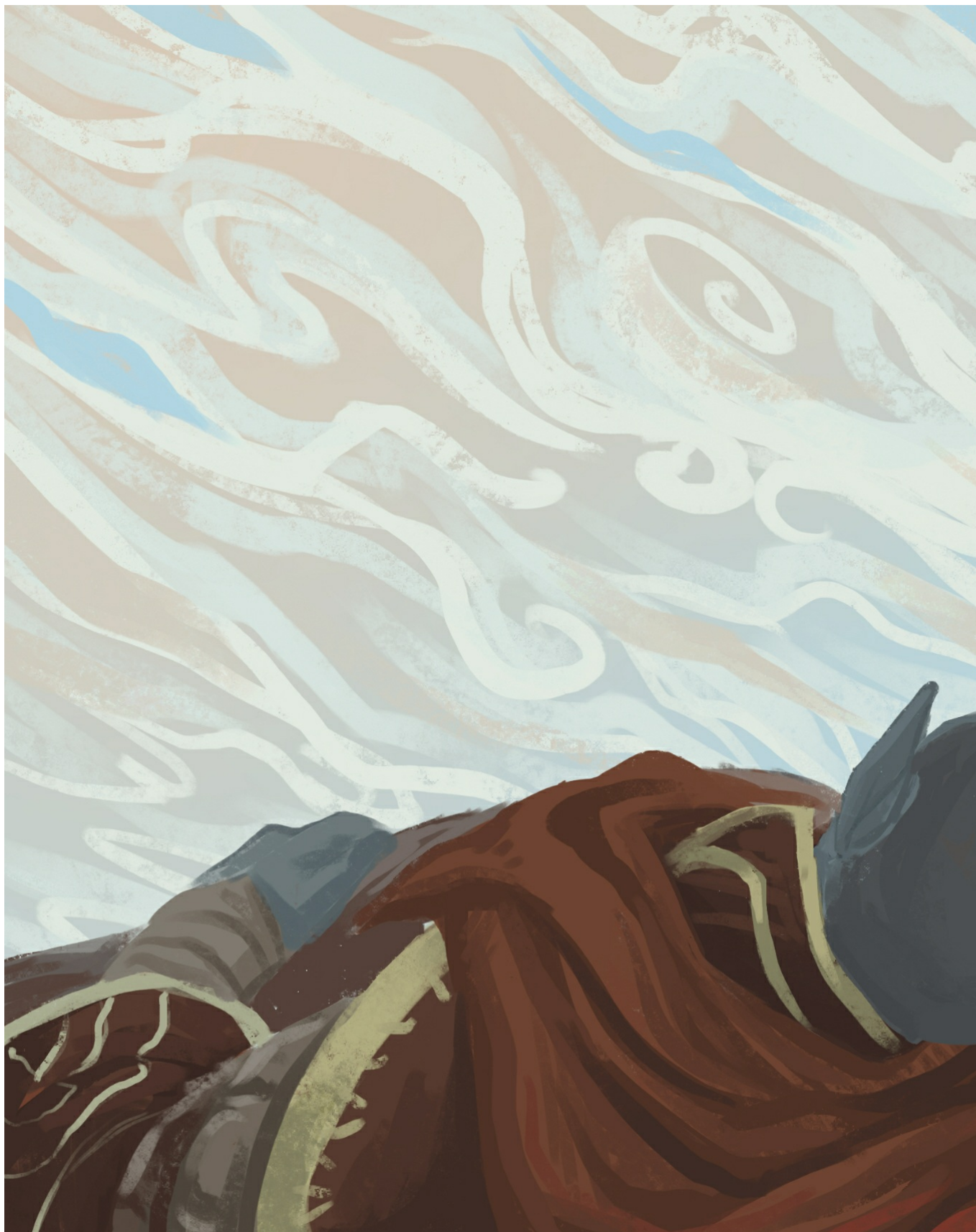
See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)



MAFVI



Art trade with Mafuria on [Tumblr](#) and [Instagram](#)



By Necoash on [Tumblr](#) - necoashenmaster on [Instagram](#)

An illustration of this scene:



*He stared at the thick layer of clouds in the sky above him as his breathing began to slow. They were moving steadily to the left, giving Neloath the dizzying sensation of gliding across the ground. Every now and then pockets of blue would emerge, only to be swallowed up by more swaths of gray.*



I commissioned my friend Gattotfisharts on [Tumblr](#) - gattostrology.art on [Instagram](#) to illustrate this scene!! :

*“Is that it?” Teldryn asked, motioning to Neloath’s hand.*

*Neloath extended his arm, straightening his fingers and inspecting the ring. “I certainly hope so.” A shimmer of enchantment caught the light and he smiled. “It would be terribly inconvenient to have to go through all that again because I stole her wedding band by accident.”*

*“But you would, wouldn’t you?” Teldryn asked with a chuckle. “Go through it all*

*again. Because you're absolutely out of your mind."*

*"I like to think I'm simply driven." Neloth grinned behind the scarf, and the two of them laughed, despite everything. It was an odd feeling – a great wash of calm, as if the broken pieces of a lock has finally slid back into place – and Neloth suddenly felt incredibly tired.*



By bonestrewncrest on [Tumblr](#) - h0ney\_lem0ns on [Instagram](#) of this scene:



*Teldryn tipped sideways, letting his head fall against Neloeth's collarbone, groaning through his teeth as the sword shifted inside him. Neloeth slid a trembling arm tentatively around Teldryn's waist, his other hand resting against his thigh. He didn't know what to say. He'd never comforted the dying before. Teldryn's breathing was becoming more and more shallow and his hand found Neloeth's, squeezing his fingers weakly.*

*"'s alright," Teldryn said again, his voice pitched low, syllables slurred. Neloeth just stared blankly ahead, grip tightening around Teldryn's waist as he felt his body go slack. His other hand shot up to hold Teldryn's head against his chest, prevent him from slipping down further, still staring sightlessly out across the snowy shoreline. Teldryn was completely still in his arms.*













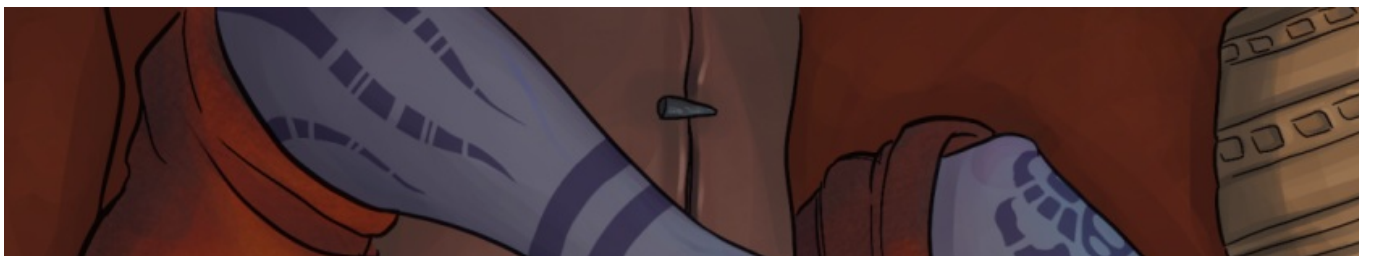


Lastly, a short comic from a scene in chapter 4 by the unbelievably talented [worthlessix](#).

I'M BLOWN AWAY BY THE TALENT Y'ALL... hnnngggg... Seriously. I'm so grateful. If you have fanart that you've done of the story, please send it my way!! You can message me on instagram (or tumblr, though I only check it one every few weeks).

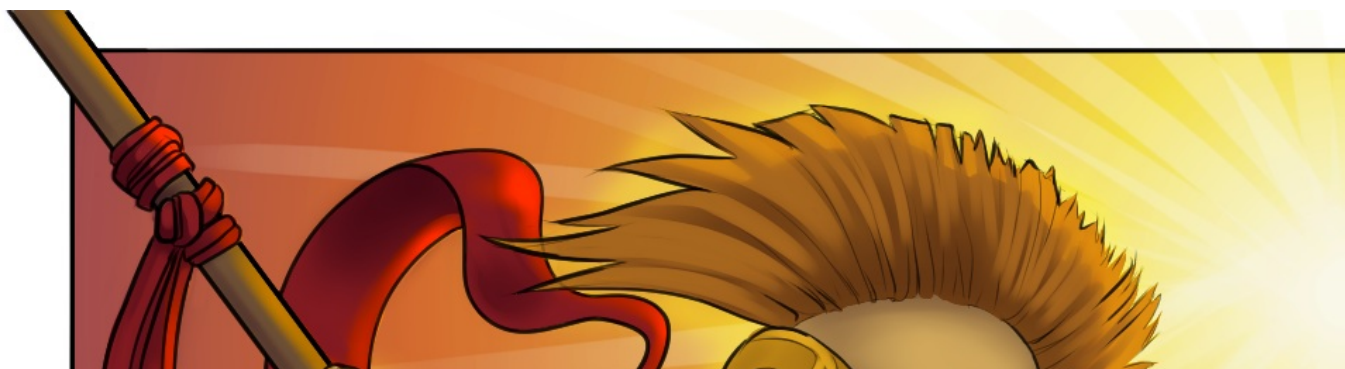


Now my art!











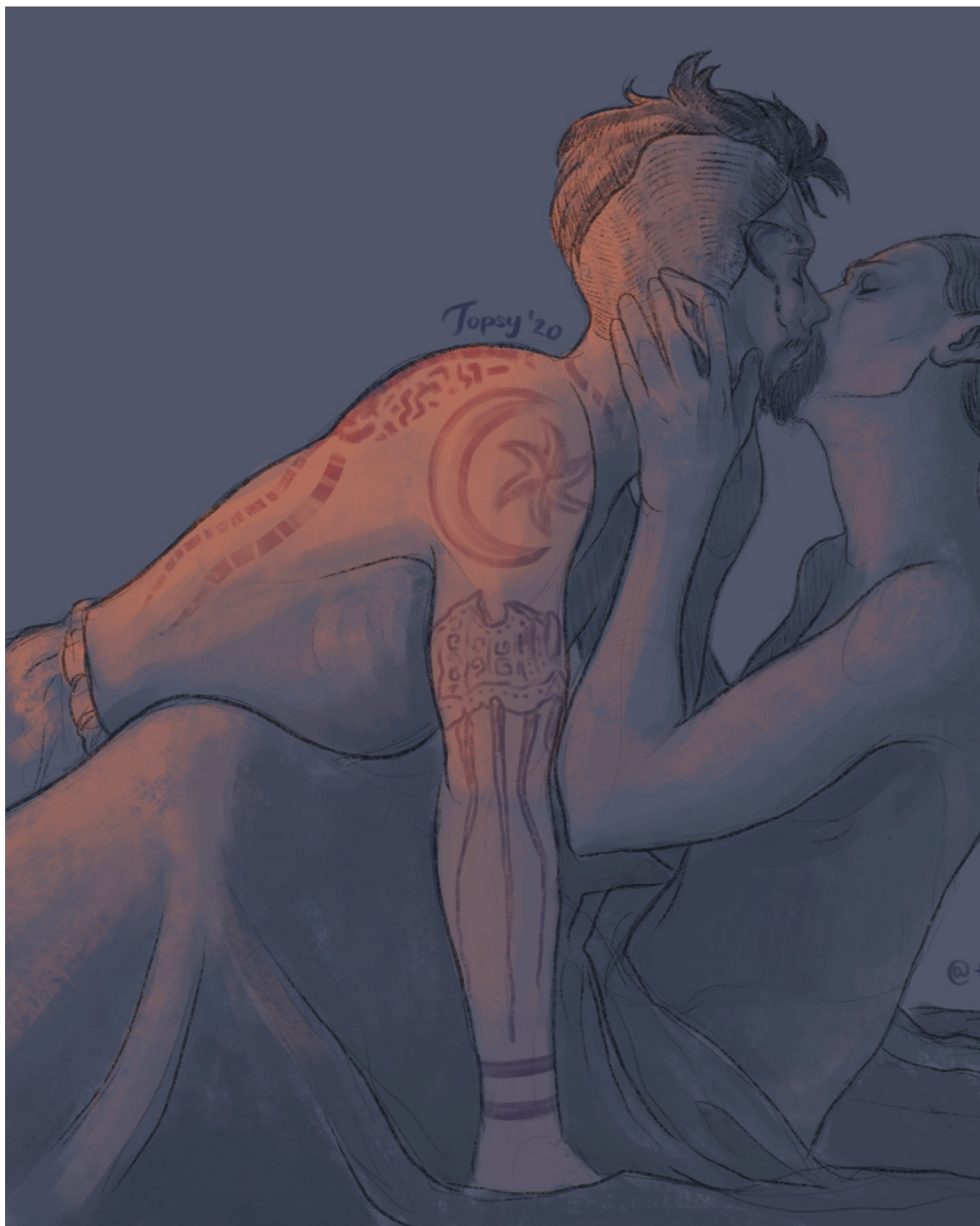


@thana.ton









## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who read this story, commented, shared it with others, found me on instagram, on tumblr (rip), and generally for just supporting my writing. <3 You guys are amazing and are what make this fandom amazing and worth being a part of.

## End Notes

Show me some love by smacking the kudos and dropping me a comment! I seriously love hearing from my readers, and I make a point to respond to every comment I get. ( ´ • ` ) ♡

Also! This story is completely finished! (\*cheers\*) So the update schedule should be relatively regular (i.e. every/every other week, depending on how fast I can get chapters edited).

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!